

Master Thesis

Online travel agencies as a source of hotel information: A content analysis

Author: Kimberly Y. Peterkin

Supervisor: Ljubica Knežević Cvelbar

Faculty of Economics

University of Ljubljana

Ljubljana, Slovenia

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Faculty of Humanities, University of Southern Denmark

Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana

Faculty of Tourism, University of Girona

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Table of Content

INTRODUCTION	1
Rationale	1
Research question	3
Structure	4
1 LITERATURE REVIEW	4
1.1 Online booking	5
1.1.1 Infrastructure	5
1.1.2 Internet usage in tourism	6
1.1.3 Online travel agencies	7
1.1.3.1 How do OTAs work?	7
1.1.3.2 The relationship between OTAs and hoteliers	8
1.1.3.2.1 Reservation/pricing	9
1.1.3.2.2 Guest reviews and star rating	9
1.2 The elements and principles of website design	10
1.2.1 The importance of website design	10
1.2.1.1 Website functions	11
1.2.1.1.1 Categorizing website functions by dimension	12
1.2.1.1.2 Website function as tools to engage customers	12
1.3 The characteristics of the content of hotel listing pages	13
1.3.1 The advertising properties of hotel descriptions	14
1.3.1.1 Persuasion and mental imagery processing	15
1.3.2 The importance of texts in hotel listings	16
1.3.2.1 The linguistic properties of text	16
1.3.3 The role of color	16
1.4 The common themes in the hotel description genre	17
1.4.1 Categories of hotel information	17

1.4.1.1	Facilities and amenities.....	18
1.4.1.2	Surrounding information.....	18
1.4.1.2.1	Attractions	18
1.4.1.2.2	Transportation	19
1.5	Information provision in hotel listings	19
1.5.1	The properties of information	19
1.5.1.1	Information barriers	20
1.6	Summary of literature.....	21
1.7	Analysis of the literature	22
2	PRESENTATION OF THE CASE.....	26
2.1	Countries	26
2.1.1	Denmark.....	26
2.1.1.1	Esbjerg	26
2.1.2	Slovenia.....	26
2.1.2.1	Ljubljana	26
2.1.3	Spain.....	27
2.1.3.1	Girona	27
2.1.4	Tourism development.....	27
2.2	Online travel agencies (OTAs).....	28
2.2.1	Booking.com	29
2.2.2	Expedia.com.....	29
2.2.3	Priceline.com.....	29
2.2.4	Hotels.com	30
2.2.5	Travelocity.com	30
2.3	Hotels in the sample	30
3	METHODOLOGY.....	34
3.1	The relationship among common terms	34

3.2	Research paradigm	34
3.2.1	The constructivist paradigm	35
3.3	Qualitative data analysis	35
3.3.1	Computer assisted/aided qualitative data analysis software	35
3.3.1.1	NVIVO.....	36
3.3.2	Content analysis	36
3.3.2.1	Content analysis in tourism.....	37
3.3.2.2	The Content analysis procedure.....	37
3.3.2.2.1	Stage 1. Formulating research questions or hypotheses	38
3.3.2.2.2	Stage 2. Identifying variables	39
3.3.2.2.3	Stage 3. Defining categories and units of measurement.....	40
3.3.2.2.4	Stage 4. Creating coding scheme	40
3.3.2.2.5	Stage 5. Sampling.....	42
3.3.2.2.6	Stage 6. Training coders/pilot reliability	44
3.3.2.2.7	Stage 7. Coding	44
3.3.2.2.8	Stage 9. Data analysis.....	44
3.4	Limitations.....	45
4	RESULTS	45
4.1	What are the website elements/functions used to enhance the OTA experience?	46
4.1.1	Dimensions of website functions	46
4.1.2	Website functions/elements on the hotel listing page	47
4.1.2.1	Personalization.....	48
4.1.2.2	Value enhancement.....	50
4.1.2.3	Reservation/prices information.....	51
4.2	What are the characteristics of the hotel listing page?	52
4.2.1	The universal features of the hotel listing page	53
4.2.2	The characteristics of the hotel listing page content	53

4.2.2.1	Slideshow pictures	54
4.2.2.2	The formatting of OTA hotel descriptions	55
4.2.2.3	Advertising techniques	57
4.2.2.3.1	Persuasion.....	57
4.2.2.3.2	Emotive descriptions	58
4.2.3	Patterns in the formulation of the hotel description within OTAs	58
4.2.3.1	Booking.com.....	58
4.2.3.2	Expedia.com	58
4.2.3.3	Hotels.com	59
4.2.3.4	Priceline	60
4.2.3.5	Travelocity.com	60
4.3	What are the common themes across the hotel description genre?	61
4.3.1	Hotel description themes.....	61
4.3.2	Hotel information	62
4.3.2.1	Popular amenities and facilities based on theme and hotel rating	62
4.3.2.2	Room amenities	63
4.3.2.3	Bathroom amenities	63
4.3.2.4	Food and beverage	64
4.3.2.5	Leisure	65
4.3.2.6	Special information.....	65
4.3.3	Locale information	66
4.3.3.1	Attractions, amenities and activities	66
4.3.3.2	Transportation.....	67
4.4	Are OTAs presenting consistent textual information?	67
4.4.1	Information provision and consistency	67
4.4.1.1	Star rating.....	67
4.4.1.2	Hotel description information content	68

4.4.1.2.1	Business services	70
4.4.1.3	Guest review ratings	71
4.5	Summary of results.....	71
5	DISCUSSION	73
5.1	Website features and elements	73
5.2	The characteristics of website content.....	75
5.2.1	Color.....	75
5.2.2	Pictures.....	76
5.2.3	Text	77
5.2.4	Layout	77
5.2.5	Advertising principles	78
5.2.5.1	Persuasion	78
5.2.6	Word count.....	79
5.3	Common themes in hotel information.....	79
5.3.1	Amenities and facilities.....	79
5.3.2	Surrounding information.....	80
5.4	Are OTAs presenting consistent textual information?	81
5.4.1	Star rating	81
5.4.2	Information content.....	82
5.4.3	Guest reviews	82
5.4.4	Recommendations	83
	CONCLUSION	86
	Limitations	88
	Future research	88
	REFERENCES.....	89
	APPENDICES	i

Table of Figures

Figure 1.1. Theoretical model showing the dimensions of hotel listing pages to be examined	25
Figure 2.1. Map showing location of Danish hotels in the study.....	31
Figure 2.2. Map showing location of Slovene hotels in the study	32
Figure 2.3. Map showing location of Spanish hotels in the study	33
Figure 3.1. A flowchart for content analysis research adapted from Neuendorf (2002)	38
Figure 3.2. Procedure for the content analysis of hotel descriptions on OTAs	39
Figure 4.1. A sample of the types of website features used by OTAs	47
Figure 4.2. Website navigational features: The “change search” box, hierarchy of search results, “back to top” button, and feedback link	48
Figure 4.3. Column chart showing the number of website elements per OTA.....	48
Figure 4.4. Five elements of basic website personalization.....	49
Figure 4.5. Website elements which give the impression of individualized content.....	50
Figure 4.6. Social media links by OTA.....	50
Figure 4.7. Website elements which provide suggestions and highlights.....	51
Figure 4.8. Dynamic website elements used to enhance the booking experience	51
Figure 4.9. Strategies used to entice browsers into booking.....	52
Figure 4.10. Hotel listing web page color schemes and hotel description text colors	54
Figure 4.11. Instances of color used to emphasize content.....	54
Figure 4.12. Pixel dimensions of the main slideshow pictures across OTAs	55
Figure 4.13. Sample hotel description formatting of each OTA.....	56
Figure 4.14. Summary of hotel description formatting styles.....	56
Figure 4.15. Hotel description word count statistics.....	57
Figure 4.16. Percentage of descriptions in which each theme was coded	61
Figure 4.17. Aggregated hotel description composition by theme	62
Figure 4.18. Room amenities by popularity.....	63
Figure 4.19. The popularity of key F&B amenities	64

Figure 4.20. Top services/amenities in the special information category	66
Figure 4.21. OTAs provide travelers with attraction information	66
Figure 4.22. Range of hotel star rating variation among OTAs.....	68
Figure 4.23. Average units of information by hotel star rating.....	69
Figure 4.24. Units of information per information category by hotel star rating.....	69
Figure 4.25. Average units of information per hotel description (by OTA)	70
Figure 4.26. Percentage of hotels for which each OTA included business services.....	70
Figure 4.27. Bar chart showing the disparity in hotel review score among OTAs	71

List of Tables

Table 1.1. Summary of the theoretical considerations surrounding the research questions	25
Table 2.1. Tourism economy statistics.....	28
Table 2.2. Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index rankings	28
Table 2.3. Tourism sector statistics 2013.....	28
Table 2.4. Key OTA statistics	29
Table 2.5. Hotels in Esbjerg and surroundings	31
Table 2.6. Hotels in Ljubljana.....	32
Table 2.7. Hotels in Girona	33
Table 3.1. Content Analysis Coding Scheme	41
Table 3.2. Breakdown of hotel attributes	44
Table 4.1. Top amenities/facilities by hotel information sub-category	62
Table 4.2. The popularity of amenities and facilities in the hotel description among star groupings.....	63

Appendices

Appendix A. Table showing website elements by dimension (part 1)	i
Appendix B. Table showing website elements by dimension (part 2).....	ii
Appendix C. OTA hotel listing page arrangement (part 1).....	iii
Appendix D. OTA hotel listing page arrangement (part 2)	iv

Appendix E. A sample of the descriptions across the various OTAs for a 3 star hotel	v
Appendix F. Table of the number of Information units across OTAs for a sample hotel ..	vii
Appendix G. Sample Hotels.com description	viii
Appendix H. Table showing the information units featured for the categories F&B, Leisure and Rooms.....	ix
Appendix I. Table showing the destination attractions featured in hotel descriptions	x
Appendix J. Hotel star rating disparity by destination and OTA.....	xi
Appendix K. Table of select results of an information consistency test on a 10 hotel sample	xii
Appendix L. Table showing the differences between guest review scores across OTAs.	xiii

INTRODUCTION

Rationale

One of the most influential factors in the purchase of a tourist product is information about goods and services (Moutinho, 1987). The importance of the Internet as a commercial channel in respect to tourist information search and provision has been firmly established by scholarly studies (Bonn, Furr, & Susskind, 1998; Marcussen, 1997). The results suggest that it is essential that tourism entities prioritize the “Internet in their marketing mixes due to its advantages, which include economical global accessibility, real-time information service, convenience in updating, interactive communications features and unique customization capabilities” (Cai, Feng, & Breiter, 2004).

The dawn of the Internet was accompanied by new dimensions in consumer behavior (Lang, 2000). It has been declared that customers of tourism products display a higher involvement in the “information search for and choices around their purchase” than for other industries as a result of the high perception of the associated risks (Decrop, 2006). The consumer seeks various ways to compensate for the uncertainty involved in the purchase of services in an online environment, where information provision leaves much to be desired (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). This is where online travel information comes into play; mitigating such risks by providing the relevant details to aid in the comparison and validation of product choices (Tan & Chen, 2011).

Arranging and booking a trip via the Internet is now the norm for travelers. The Internet has revolutionized the concept of commerce by providing different avenues of information flow, and offering a convenient and efficient channel for distributing products and services (Kim, Kim, & Han, 2007). Online channels accounted for 52.3% of the reservations for top hotel brands in 2010, and a sizeable portion of that business is derived from OTAs (Pan, Zhang, & Law, 2013). A small scale study found that a hotel’s listing on Expedia increased total reservation volume by 7.5 to 26% depending on the hotel. Surprisingly, this number excluded reservations processed through the OTA itself (Anderson, 2011). OTA’s also provide travelers with insight into the facilities and services of a hotel and destination on a whole (Otegbulu & Tenigbade, 2011); highlighting the need for a study of such content.

Regardless of these advantages, one study found that 55% of guests expressed dissatisfaction with some aspect of the booking process. Lack of information about the hotel and its services were quoted most often as the critical factor (Mason & Roberts, 2004). This leads to the pertinent issue of the quality of the content of OTA websites, and begs the question of the degree of consistency of hotel information within and among OTAs, and whether basic informational elements are being omitted. Though OTA’s have become progressively better in enticing consumers to book using their platform, later studies concurred that information gaps remain which impact customer desire and satisfaction (Rong, Li, & Law, 2009; Thongpapanl & Ashraf, 2011). These studies point to the need for increased cooperation between OTAs and hoteliers to formulate and present relevant informational content in order to transform browsers into buyers (Rong et al., 2009).

The fact is, the evidence on consumer attitudes toward advertising shows that consumers prefer advertising that helps in decision-making (Zanot, 1984), and the degree of information provided in an advertisement is the most important factor correlated with

overall advertising value (Ducoffe, 1995). Based on the classification scheme by Cook (2001), OTA hotel descriptions are in essence advertisements. Just as studies show that information content varies across advertising media (Philport & Arbittier, 1997), as well as communication styles among advertising agencies (Sasser & Koslow, 2012), it can be assumed that OTAs present textual information in diverse ways. While it is widely accepted that hotel advertisements on television predominantly portray guests in a leisure environment, accompanied by a captivating voice-over narration and relaxing music (Jobber, 1993), we have yet to explore the characteristics of OTA hotel descriptions.

Information content was cited as the most important dimension of online travel agencies and is the greatest indicator of overall customer satisfaction (Ku & Fan, 2009). As such, OTAs are now faced with the pressure of providing more and more information to prospective guests, in a bid to outdo their competitors. Siu and Fung (1998) in their study of hotel advertisements reiterated the positive effects of visual materials such as headlines, pictures, and other types of graphics. Their study found that visual materials are fundamental to the decision-making and information processing exploits of online consumers. High quality information content, along with effective design, features and functionality, are consistently cited as critical aspects of website success which impact customer satisfaction (Benckendorff, 2006; Ranganathan & Ganapathy, 2002). OTAs are native to the Internet, and as such the user-friendly design of their websites is paramount to their success.

Furthermore, travel entities can supply high quality information to prospective customers using a variety of tools. In the case of hospitality services, this could take the form of videos, virtual tours and comparison charts. Findings suggest that hotel managers can improve property information, as well as information about the locale through the use of these kinds of features; with details such as their location in relation to shopping centers, and other surrounding attractions (Beldona, Morrison, & O'Leary, 2005). It would be enlightening to ascertain if OTAs have managed to implement this advice as well, and to catalogue the interface features that OTAs use to add value to the online hotel booking experience.

When a hotel places a listing on an OTA, the design of the site is intransigent, with the only manipulable features of their profile being pictures and descriptions (Kaynama & Black, 2000). Similarly, most OTAs have a fixed description format and word limit, which necessitate that pertinent property information be presented within these constraints. Furthermore, OTAs are often responsible for gathering information from the hotelier and formulating the profile description as they see fit (Expedia, 2013). Considering that OTAs display numerous hotels per destination, and allow for easy refinement of the results based on price range and review score (Pan et al., 2013), some hotel profiles are not even afforded the chance at consideration. Once a prospective buyer has filtered the offerings based on personal criteria, is the hotel description formulated in a persuasive style which appeals to and captures the attention of the user, and influences them into booking?

Researchers have proposed frameworks to standardize the provision of information by online entities, but there still exists a lack of consensus about the quantity and degree of customization required to increase customer satisfaction and purchase intention (Thongpapanl & Ashraf, 2011). When people shop online they trust that the websites will provide accurate and comprehensive information, likewise, hoteliers expect that their business is presented in the most attractive manner. One could argue that the OTA's work on a commission basis, however, hoteliers feel their fees are exorbitant and as such OTA's

could seek to counter these sentiments by creating more informative sites that would increase the rate of hotel bookings, thereby increasing hotel occupancy and revenue (Choi & Kimes, 2002).

Most studies on tourist information sources have focused on data from hotel websites (Gan, Sim, Tan, & Tna, 2007), guidebooks (Osti, Turner, & King, 2009), travel magazines (Hsu & Song, 2013) and online destination forums (Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin, & Backman, 2010). Similarly, a number of approaches have attempted to describe the communicative style and rhetorical structures of particular textual genres such as application letters (Upton & Connor, 2001) and letters of recommendation (Precht, 2000). To date, researchers have neglected to examine the hotel listings of OTAs as a source of tourist information, and as such there is an absence of literature detailing the characteristics of hotel descriptions.

A well established method of measuring advertising information, introduced by Resnik and Stern (1977), involves content analysis to determine which of 14 information cues are present in an advertisement. The approach has been applied in scores of studies to measure the information content of advertising in various forms of media, cultural settings and types of products (Abernethy & Franke, 1996). Although the research at hand does not employ the content categories prescribed, it adapts the content analysis framework of Neuendorf (2002) to study hotel descriptions. With the sales volume of online travel agencies eclipsing that of hotel websites, it is pertinent that the information content on OTA platforms be examined more closely. After 2006, OTAs gained increased recognition from scholars and since then there has been a surge in research covering various aspects such as:

- a) usability (Chiou, Lin, & Perng, 2011; Manganari, Siomkos, & Vrechopoulos, 2014);
- b) e-service quality (Bernardo, Marimon, & Alonso, 2012; Fu Tsang, Lai, & Law, 2010);
- c) general attributes (Kim et al., 2007; Musante, Bojanic, & Zhang, 2009);
- d) website quality (Derong, Zongqing, & Xiaolin, 2009; Park, Gretzel, & Sirakaya, 2007);
- e) customer satisfaction (Ching-Fu & Ya-Ling, 2010; Cho & Agrusa, 2006); and,
- f) decision-making (Conyette, 2012; Pan et al., 2013).

Research question

An examination of current literature reveals the absence of studies that catalogue the features of various OTA platforms, to enable comparison and contrast. Similarly, the non-existence of content analyses of the information provided in hotel listings has become evident. The time has come for an evaluation of the content and an inventory of the features of these websites. This paper seeks to address these gaps, and contribute to the understanding of OTAs as tourist information sources. As such, it will focus on presenting (not evaluating) the features of the hotel listing page of five OTAs, and on analyzing the content of the hotel descriptions of 30 hotels in Denmark, Slovenia and Spain, a total of 150 descriptions. It will also evaluate the consistency of hotel information within and across OTAs.

Hence, the master thesis title is “*Online travel agencies as a source of hotel information: A content analysis.*” Consequently, the research questions are:

- a. What are the website design functions used to enhance the OTA experience?
- b. What are the characteristics of the content of hotel listing pages?

- c. What are the common themes across the hotel description genre?
- d. Are OTAs presenting consistent textual information?

These findings will provide insight into the details tourists seek about a hotel's services, facilities and environment; or more accurately, the information OTAs perceive tourists to be desirous of. It will reveal whether their styles of communication reflect that hotel descriptions are in essence treated as advertisements by consumers, and divulge the existence or absence of unspoken standards in formulating descriptions. It will disclose the degree of consistency in information content within and among OTAs, and highlight which OTAs are making strides in providing features to enhance hotel listings. It will also categorize and describe the information that is being provided to travelers in regard to hotel offerings. Lastly, without explicit intention the study will show which OTAs should improve their content and features. The fact is, the burgeoning dominance of OTA's should compel them to provide quality information.

Structure

Following the introduction which gave a synopsis of the literature rationalizing the intended investigation, a detailed assessment of the scholarly works which were selected to shed light on the theoretical considerations surrounding the research questions will be presented. This section ends with a summary and conclusion which ties together the existing knowledge and alludes to the research areas not examined therein. The subsequent section will highlight the tourism organizations, destinations and properties which serve to lend a tangible dimension to the inquiry, and which will be used as points of reference during the discourse. The methodological framework will justify the paradigmatic stance of the researcher and provide support for the method utilized, as well as underscore the limitations of the study. The analysis and discussion section details the findings of the research, bolstered by the results of existing literature, and seeks to answer the research questions posed at the inception. It utilizes graphical aids to present the data and is accompanied by appendices which provide additional insight into the data acquired during the analysis. The conclusion section summarizes the findings and makes recommendations to improve online travel agencies. The work concludes with a list of authors whose scholarly endeavors were built upon to produce a thesis which has made an original contribution to the field of tourism.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is "an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers. It is directly related to and ordered based on the research questions posed, recognizing discrepancies with the literature, organizing the results into a summary of the known and unknown, and deriving questions for future research" (Taylor, 2008).

Ideally, the theoretical foundations of this research topic on a whole should be based in the field of linguistics or computer sciences, seeing that it seeks to content analyze textual descriptions and catalogue website features. Notwithstanding, this program is tourism based and the focus is not the properties of the text itself but the general information which it presents. For this reason, it must be made clear that the aim of this literature review is to demonstrate the importance of OTAs as a source of tourist information and specifically hotel information, the considerations which govern the provision and characteristics of content, to showcase the breadth (or lack) of the various aspects of hotel information, as well as the concept of information itself. Although the literature review

presents themes in a variety of contexts, the actual study will focus on how they relate to the OTA's hotel listing function.

The literature review will be arranged into four chapters, three of which detail the considerations associated with each research question:

- a) The initial chapter serves as an introduction to the realm of online booking and the online travel agency;
- b) the second focuses on the principles and elements of web design,
- c) the third on the characteristics of the information presented on the hotel listing page;
- d) the fourth focuses on the type of information presented in the hotel descriptions; and,
- e) the fifth the properties of information.

In order to fully grasp the concept of online travel agencies as a source of information, the review begins with an overview of the e-commerce industry, as well as the history and workings of the infrastructure that facilitates its existence and operation. Knowing the tools consumers use to access information online is key – because this is the domain of OTAs – as well as the visualization of the role OTA's play in the vast framework of tourist information. To achieve this level of comprehension, the concept of the World Wide Web (WWW), the Internet, websites, computers and search engines must be understood. In doing this, the stage is set for grasping the ideas that will be presented in the second chapter which speaks about website design.

1.1 Online booking

Since the turn of the millennium, the travel and tourism industry was recognized as the largest facilitator of online transactions (Werthner & Ricci, 2004). Within the tourism industry, hotel booking is the second largest revenue area based on the volume of sales generated through online channels (Marcussen, 2008). Furthermore, recent research into online information search (Xiang et al., 2008) has revealed that travelers invest time in the location of information on the Internet, using various information providers (Inversini & Buhalis, 2009) before settling on the tourism product of their choice and reserving online (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009).

1.1.1 Infrastructure

The Internet is the most modern and technologically advanced source of information, and can be simply defined as a “network of computers which allows message transfer from the server of one computer network to the server of other networks” (Janoschka, 2004). The Internet was initially utilized by scientists, until two decades later in 1994, when the volume of commercial users outpaced the numbers of this exclusive group (Cronin, 1995) and continues today in this fashion (cited in Huizingh, 2000).

The World Wide Web (WWW) is the most popular Internet application and is the key driver behind commercial usage of the Internet (Chang & Cheung, 2001). The primary WWW technology is the web browser, for example Google Chrome, which “establishes relationships among the otherwise unrelated bulk of information or messages.” The WWW has transformed the world of commerce, as it “supports the redesign of information flows and organizational structures, help firms capture strategic advantages,

establish new distribution channels, and create new information-based products” (Kalakota & Robinson, 1999; McKeown & Watson, 1996).

The computer has become a staple personal possession, serving as the primary highway to the Internet, and a fundamental component of business environments. Within the last decade, the variety of uses afforded by this revolutionary device has grown, as well as its capability to interact with other electronic devices. One study showed that people used the computer nine hours per week, with the Internet being the most popular application, accounting for 63% of usage time (Beauvisage, 2009).

Another integral feature of the Internet is the website, which has been defined as” a number of content elements (pages) that are linked to each other” (Hoffman, Novak, & Chatterjee, 1995). It facilitates “marketing, advertising, product and service information and communication transactions between a business and its existing customers or potential customers” (Kasavana, Knutson, & Polonowski, 1998). From the perspective of marketers, people using the Web can be classified as “customers, potential customers, suppliers, and competitors” (Muller, 1996).

In addition to general search engines there are travel specific engines such as Farecompare.com (Cao & Nguyen, 2012). Despite their beneficial function, general search engines are flawed and fraught with challenges (McDonnell & Shiri, 2011), and have overwhelmed consumers with information (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006), giving rise to the need for systems capable of presenting users with filtered results that have been organized for easy retrieval of information (Fesenmaier, Werther, & Wober, 2006), and hence the need for the services provided by online travel agencies.

1.1.2 Internet usage in tourism

It is evident that online trading is rapidly gaining importance, with online travel agencies replacing traditional ones (Buhalis & Licata, 2002). Internet World Statistics (2012) estimated that 2.4 billion people were using the Internet by the end of June 2012, that is, 34.3% of the world population. At the end of the same period, there were an estimated 820 million Internet users in Europe, an almost 400% growth over the 2000 total of 105 million, a penetration of 63.2%. The percentage of regular Internet users in Denmark, Slovenia and Spain was 89, 65 and 51% respectively, while mobile Internet usage was 61, 30 and 39% in that order. The most popular activity across countries was finding information about goods and services, and in Spain the use of travel and accommodation services (European Commission, 2013).

Research conducted in 2012 showed that 148 million travel bookings were made on the Internet that year, accounting for 117.7 billion euros in sales. Of these bookings, 57% were made online, with OTAs commanding a share of 19.5%. Hotel reservations were responsible for 39% of online travel bookings, with Booking.com, Expedia.com and Hotels.com receiving the most traffic (Statistic Brain, 2013). In a recent report, HVS Global Hospitality Services (2014) disclosed that the sum of hotel transactions made in Europe for 2013 was 7.7 billion euros, a 39% increase from 2012. Forrester Research (2012) predicts that by 2017 annual travel sales within Europe will reach 191 billion euros, an average yearly growth of 11%. With consumers turning to online forms of distribution, it is pertinent to research the performance of these sales driven forms of businesses in the realm of information provision.

1.1.3 Online travel agencies

The account of how the digital convergence caused a shift in hotel distribution that has contributed to the dominance of OTAs will be explored hereafter. Details regarding the functioning of OTAs and the kinds of services they offer will be presented, as well as facts which serve to increase awareness of the concerns of potential clients, and get a glimpse as to the reason OTAs have become popular with consumers. The opportunity to comprehend the complex relationship between OTAs and hoteliers, and the advantages of using OTAs is also featured in this section, in addition to the motivation for hoteliers to exercise increased interest in OTA content.

Online distribution and booking technologies have had a great impact on the hospitality industry (O'Connor & Frew, 2002). Online distribution channels provide “sufficient information to the right people at the right time and in the right place to allow a purchase decision to be made, and provide a mechanism where the consumer can make a reservation and pay for the required product” (Go & Pine, 1995). Since 2001, online distribution has been hailed as the future of commerce, and the catalyst of the shift from conventional distribution channels (Kasavana & Singh, 2001) to digital channels; slowly fuelling the trend toward disintermediation (Bennett & Lai, 2005). OTAs only appeared after 1990, but today they play a pivotal role in online distribution of travel products and services. “OTAs have built their success on economies of scope, aggregating products and reducing costs to provide the final consumers with cheaper solutions” (Kim, Kim, & Kandampully, 2009).

1.1.3.1 How do OTAs work?

As the online travel agent market grows, one will notice that not all websites carry out the same functions, with some being more than just stand alone OTAs. Booking aggregators such as Momondo get feeds from major OTAs, then display to the users all of the results on one screen. It then redirects the users to an airline, cruise, hotel, or car rental site or online travel agent for the final purchase of a ticket. Metasearch engines like Kayak.com are so named because they conduct searches across multiple independent search engines. Both aggregators and metasearch engines generate revenues through advertising and charging OTAs for referring clients. Consolidators such as Expedia.com purchase blocks of rooms directly from hotels and airlines at negotiated prices which they then retail to consumers online (Beirne, 2005; Russell, 2006).

Online channels empower consumers to arrange and combine various travel products toward a complete vacation, with an ease that is not afforded by conventional travel providers. Still, due to the existence of the various online sources which must be coordinated to complete the planning process users often become frustrated. In the case of accommodation, rooms can be purchased directly from hotel websites, third party sites or destination sites. The degree of detail offered by each channel depends on whether accommodation is an integral or secondary product in their repertoire (Beldona et al., 2005). OTA's diminish this tedious process by presenting customers with an array of travel products after just one search (Yacouel & Fleischer, 2012).

The basic function of an OTA is to provide the consumer with travel product information to assist in the decision-making process, which often times culminates in a booking (Pan et al., 2013). In order to perform this function the OTA web page begins by gathering certain information from potential guests. This data is passed on to a computerized

reservation system (CRS), which searches the database of all offerings available and returns with a selection for the customer's perusal. If the customer decides to book, the OTA sends a purchase request to the CRS, after which it receives a commission from the company the booking was made with (Clemons, Hann, & Hitt, 2002). Aside from facilitating reservations, OTA websites provide extra content such as "weather reports, currency converters, e-mail notifications, maps and travel articles" (Kim et al., 2007). To provide efficient service, OTAs must meet the basic expectations of accommodation, airplane and car rental offerings. Furthermore, in order to ensure the customer appeal of the services they promote, a user-friendly interface forms an integral part of the platform which aids in completion of travel transactions. For travelers who are uncertain about the offerings in a destination, or the travel process on a whole, OTAs now provide destination guides and travel tips (Kaynama & Black, 2000).

1.1.3.2 The relationship between OTAs and hoteliers

OTA portals are essential factors for modern hoteliers who, on one hand need to engage with former and prospective clients to raise awareness of, and interest in their property and, on the other hand, need to find a convenient commercial outlet for their property (Inversini & Masiero, 2014). Nevertheless, OTAs have outperformed hotels in maintaining an effective and extensive digital presence (Morosan & Jeong, 2008), using their unrivalled economic resources and market dominance, to coerce hoteliers into wholesaling large blocks of their room inventory at heavily discounted rates (Carroll & Sigauw, 2003).

Major engines such as Google have developed algorithms that enable marketers to identify the specific interests of, and target users based on the keywords they have entered. As a result of these capabilities, "search engines have been recognized as the "first step" in the travel planning process" (Fesenmaier, Xiang, Pan, & Law, 2011), and the most potent channel which hotels can employ to communicate with potential visitors. On the contrary, research has shown that OTAs have outbid hoteliers for these critical keywords, therefore receiving a greater percentage of online traffic queries for accommodation (Blankenbaker & Mishra, 2009) and further strengthening OTA dominance. Similarly, given that most users restrict their searches to the first page of results (Spink & Jensen, 2004), it may be useful for hotels to invest in sponsored listings on OTAs, as a hotel's website has little chance of appearing on the first page of a search for accommodation on search engines; however, hoteliers can easily bid for the first spot on OTA destination results pages.

Hotels also face the issue of the OTA having the final say regarding their hotel listing. Expedia (2013) states that, "the Expedia Lodging Content team is responsible for creating and maintaining your Expedia description." This encompasses pictures, descriptions, amenities, nearby offerings and driving directions. It recommends that hotels send an email whenever they would like to make updates to their hotel description. Nevertheless, it also states, "Please note that Expedia reserves the final say concerning hotel listings and may be unable to implement the changes requested."

Regardless of these shortcomings, Yacouel and Fleischer (2012) sought to promote the OTA as a credible channel. They argue that despite the success of Trip Advisor, OTAs are a more legitimate channel of opinion as they publish reviews from past guests who booked a hotel room through them, and only allow guests who actually stayed at the hotel to write reviews. Thus, unreliable reviews only rarely penetrate OTAs' websites. They report that OTAs also monitor the hotel descriptions published on their websites, ensuring that the hotels' actual informative data match those that are published. An OTA conducts

transactions with a large number of tourists and hoteliers and its relationship with both groups of players repeats itself. The authors posit that if an OTA does not deliver reliable information, it will lose future customers. Therefore, the mechanism that guarantees the OTA's credibility is the OTA's own reputation.

1.1.3.2.1 Reservation/pricing

O'Connor and Murphy (2008) found that OTA transaction fees can range as high as 30% of the nightly rate, and as such high sales volumes are needed to compensate for this plunge in hotelier profits on account of commissions. Research suggests that only between 1% and 5% of potential customers make a purchase, and this increases the need for hotels to improve their OTA profile to capture consumer business (Clemons et al., 2002). Despite this adversarial relationship, there are auxiliary benefits for hotels concerning their presence on OTAs. The *billboard effect* involves "the marketing or advertising benefits hotels enjoy as a consequence of being featured in online travel agency search results." Because OTAs are easy to find online and feature a wide range of products from numerous sources, consumers use them as a one stop channel to research the location, offerings, rates and service performance of multiple hotels. A study based on four hotels, found that a hotel's listing on Expedia.com increased total reservation volume by 7.5 to 26%. This number excluded reservations processed through the OTA itself (Anderson, 2011). Likewise, gaining a comprehensive grasp of market segments and using the knowledge of these segments to further business objectives has been a beneficial yet difficult undertaking for hospitality professionals (Füller & Matzler, 2008). Online businesses such as OTAs have made advances in this regard and are now able to provide targeted advertising to help clients reach customers who fit certain demographics (Expedia Media Solutions, 2013).

1.1.3.2.2 Guest reviews and star rating

The greatest contention between hoteliers and OTAs concerns the depiction of quality. In the case of guest reviews the power is with neither party; but within the hands of customers. Research has shown that online reviews are in essence the digitization of the word-of-mouth phenomenon (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004), and that online reviews and ratings are a trustworthy resource for bolstering the confidence of online shoppers in their commerce decisions (Aral, 2014). As a result, consumers can easily publish their opinions concerning a purchase via reviews and ratings, and fellow customers seek these recommendations to aid in validating their choices. These kinds of recommendations have even proven to be more influential regarding a purchase than those from experts and marketers (Sparks & Browning, 2011).

In a similar light, the transparency of the Internet equips customers with the ability to compare hotel star ratings across numerous online travel agencies. One scholar declared that this type of categorization system is a suitable measure of price, and a somewhat reliable indicator of quality (Israeli, 2002). Still, star rating schemes vary by country and organization, and even OTAs have been shown to administer their own star rating schemes. In this light, if the star ratings for a particular hotel are not consistent across the web, this information will cease to be a guide in customer decision-making and can damage the reputation and business prospects of the affected hotel (Guillet & Law, 2010).

Room nights are a perishable commodity, with losses having dire consequences for a hotel's balance sheet (Vallen & Vallen, 2009). The factors surrounding online distribution

and consumer behavior are therefore critical to the financial success of hospitality organizations. Maintaining control over this channel is crucial for hotels, as hotel room inventory is “sold in a market characterized by high-capital costs, increasing competition and shrinking margins” (O’Connor & Frew, 2004). As a result, hotels must skillfully manipulate the available online revenue channels to boost occupancy while retaining the reputation of their brand, price integrity, and maximizing yield (Kang, Brewer, & Baloglu, 2007). Hotels that can utilize the Internet efficiently as a distribution channel in a bid to differentiate themselves from their competitors will reap the benefits (Enz, 2003; Sigala, 2003), while those that falter will see potential profit disappear (cited in Stringam & Jr, 2010).

1.2 The elements and principles of website design

To focus solely on evaluating the information provided without examining the context in which it appears is similar to assessing the presentation skills of someone based on their appearance. This chapter seeks to frame the provision of information so that a wholesome assessment can be conducted. Websites have surpassed print media as the premier source of travel information because they can be conveniently and affordably accessed, and bring a wide range of information to our finger tips. This section speaks to the development of websites over time, the purposes they serve and their information provision function. A summary of web design principles and quality measurements is provided in the following paragraphs. It details the obstacles faced by OTA websites and the design related issues they must continuously address.

Websites function as an organization’s link to the world at large, and can connect with a larger more dispersed audience than other marketing and communication tools; which may comprise novices as well as experienced users from various demographics (Hite & Railsback, 2010). As websites evolved they have experienced a shift from a focus on the technical aspects when the aim of organizations was solely to have a basic presence online; to a product-oriented focus when the sales potential of the web was realized, and now to a customer-centered one as online competitiveness among firms increases (Hite & Railsback, 2010). With the globalization of economy, and the trend towards both a physical and digital existence in the commercial sphere, companies are scrambling to establish websites which serve to bring public exposure to their firms, improve the service provided to clients, enhance information exchange with suppliers and clientele, and increase revenue through online sale; all of which are exploited by OTAs (Cheung & Huang, 2002).

1.2.1 The importance of website design

If a commercial website is to generate exponential sales, it must have features that appeal to potential buyers (Lynch, Kent, & Srinivasan, 2001). Besides providing information to clients, online businesses must present the information in a user-friendly manner through website dimensions such as personalization. Therefore, effective Web design concerns the creation of a functioning, well organized, content rich platform that is interactive, as well as aesthetically attractive, to produce a fulfilling browsing experiences. Law and Qi (2008) reasoned that the attractiveness, usability and functionality of online retail platforms are indispensable if the intent is to convert browsers to buyers. The study hypothesized that the majority of e-buyers start as e-browsers, however, the rate of conversion is dependent to a great extent on the perceived attractiveness of the site” (Nusair & Parsa, 2011).

Much scholarly research has been conducted toward the identification of the elements of economically successful retail websites. Websites accomplish their company's aims through the use of functions and content, that display information about the business' products and services (Rayport & Jaworski, 2004). "High quality information content, accompanied by effective design, navigation, security, and functionality, has been identified by several scholars as factors that are crucial website success" (Liu & Arnett, 2000; Ranganathan & Ganapathy, 2002; Shamdasani, Mukherjee, & Malhotra, 2008). Interestingly, researchers contend that the medium through which a product is sold is a more reliable indicator of customer perception about a business than the product itself is (Lu & Lin, 2002). "Similarly, the design of a website has a direct, significant impact on sales, with technical performance and site design cited as the main obstacles in online purchases" (Cox & Dale, 2002). Investigation has also proven that consumers "are more likely to visit and purchase products and service from websites that display desirable qualities" (Shchiglik & Barnes, 2004).

1.2.1.1 Website functions

Functions are those components which allow a website to be manipulated by users, or the effectiveness of websites in providing users with the information that they require (Awad, 2004). The technical performance of a website is vital because its interface must be responsive, and well organized with the inclusion of the necessary navigational structures to ensure seamless interaction between it and its users (Carlson & O'Cass, 2011). For this reason, web designers must find a balance between an attractive design and the provision of information (Huizingh, 2000). Dysfunctional websites frustrate users and result in the abandonment of the site, especially if they have significant challenges locating relevant content or utilizing features. For e-businesses that depend solely on the Internet for processing transactions, the implications are dire and mean the loss of potential revenue (Argus Clearinghouse, 1999), which will continue until the issue is addressed (cited in Kaynama & Black, 2000).

Website aspects that relate to perceived ease of use is the information, features and functionality available on the site. The review of the academic literature has identified three dimensions of web quality: technical adequacy, web content, and web appearance. Web appearance includes qualities such as "attractiveness; organization; proper use of colors; proper use of fonts; graphics-text balance; style consistency; proper choice of page length; good labeling; proper use of language/style; and color consistency." In regard to web content its: "conciseness; usefulness; broadness; completeness; uniqueness; originality; clarity; currency; and accuracy" are paramount; all of which are applicable to hotel descriptions on OTAs (Aladwani & Palvia, 2002).

One web page component, the "grid" "consists of the vertical and horizontal lines that divide the available area prior to designing a page and aids in the positioning of content such as graphics and text. The attention paid to their positioning and layout make an impact by engaging the user, and whenever grids are used with thoughtfulness and expertise in relation to content; this relationship produces exceptionally effective pages" (Lawrence & Tavakol, 2007). Color also plays an integral role in emphasizing and delineating web page layout. It is used in backgrounds, text, and imagery to help divide and represent information. On the OTAs, different informational features have different colored backgrounds to help direct the eye of the user.

Huang and Christopher (2003) emphasized “the importance of information search in commercial website design and reiterated that websites should contain a site map, a product index, and a product search function” to assist in navigation. In a similar study, Taylor and England (2006) concluded that the more accessible the content surrounding the products and services on a website; the greater the likelihood that the products and services will be bought by customers. Similarly, website elements are the tools that aid user decisions, and are used by customers to assist in the purchasing process. As such, website designers can enhance user decision-making while shopping online by providing such decision-making tools. On an OTA, a price comparison tool, is one such element, that can prove extremely valuable for price-sensitive users in making a purchasing decision (Liu, Tucker, Koh, & Kappelman, 2003). According to Amant (2005) “the existence or absence of just one design feature is sufficient to affect the likeability and perception of a website.” While studies have been conducted on the features of hotel websites that are used to add value to the booking experience (Leung, Rong, Li, & Law, 2012), fewer have focused on the websites of OTAs.

1.2.1.1.1 Categorizing website functions by dimension

Prior studies have measured information richness on hotel websites, and have also tried to classify the existing website features. The first attempt was taken by Murphy, Forrest, Wotring, and Brymer (1996), who identified 32 elements and assigned them to four general categories: service and information, promotion and marketing, technology and management, and interactivity. Later on, Chung and Law (2003) in an effort to measure the performance of hotel websites, the authors proposed a model of information evaluation. It was based on a conceptual framework which was comprised of five hotel website dimensions, including customer contact information, facilities information, reservation information, surrounding area information, and management of websites, with each having relevant attributes. Hotel managers were asked to rank the dimensions and attributes based on their level of importance, with findings showing significant differences in performance score for all dimensions among the luxurious, mid-priced, and budget hotel websites. Zafiropoulos et al. (2004) used a survey to identify which information services were featured on the websites of Greek hotels. Their model consisted of seven dimensions: facilities information, customer contact information, reservation and prices information, surrounding area information, management of the website, company information, communication and recording users’ attitudes. The author later went on to conduct another survey which gauged the importance that both hoteliers and users attached to website dimensions and found that there were differences in their perception (Zafiropoulos & Vrana, 2006)

1.2.1.1.2 Website function as tools to engage customers

Godin (1999) pioneered the idea of “permission marketing” which focuses on how websites use interactive features to enter into dialogue with customers, in an attempt to create and maintain long term commercial relationships. A similar concept, “relationship marketing” is defined as “all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). According to Gretzel, Yuan, and Fesenmaier (2000), marketing strategies that fit well with the character of the Web are those based on personalization, permission, involvement, and experience. Therefore, the concepts of personalization and value enhancement are critical in establishing fruitful relationships with potential customers (Hanson, 2000), segment consumers (Jackson & Wang, 1994), retain existing customers (Campbell, 1997), and

maintain customer loyalty (Forcht & Cochran, 1999); all of which are critical for competitiveness (cited in Yoon, Choi, & Sohn, 2008). “Product innovation” is also important in attracting customers, and is defined as the “introduction of a good or service that is new or significantly improved with respect to its characteristics or intended uses.” Studies show that innovations are perceived to have a positive effect on the sales of a company (Nicolau & Santa-María, 2013), as the Internet empowers businesses to gain regular real-time updates into users responses to various promotions and offerings; and thereby foster a lasting relationship (Abela & Sacconaghi, 1997).

1.3 The characteristics of the content of hotel listing pages

Hotel descriptions on OTAs are not usually considered as advertisements; however, research suggests that they should be viewed as such. The characteristics of digital advertising and its virtues will be examined, as well as a small foray into hotel advertising. This section of the review will demonstrate the important role that text plays in online marketing and advertising, and briefly speak to its linguistic properties such as persuasion, which are mobilized in marketing, and which have been proven to enhance readability and retention. The concept of mental imagery processing which is beneficial in this endeavor will be discussed, as well as the impact of color on consumer behavior. Most importantly, the components of website content will be addressed, and its classification.

“Content refers to the information, features, or services that are offered in the website” (Huizingh, 2000), or more specifically, to “all the digital subject matter presented on a website, including text, image, audio, and video while design refers to the way the content is made available for Web visitors.” A logical layout, accompanied by a well established structure, fluent words, pleasing visual effects through the combination of colors, practical page style, and user friendly navigational schemes assists customers in the understanding and use of a website. Elements of space, use of animation and/or audio, use and size of images, number of words per line, and the color, style and size of text are also essential considerations. Moreover, the task of designing content encompasses more than the selection of elements that are suited to the target audience; it concerns the perfect blending of all the aforementioned dimensions because while they may be perfect in themselves they need to complement each other (Rosen & Purinton, 2004). Furthermore, users may be familiar with websites to varying degrees, with different levels of browsing skills, and therefore, the features should be appealing and appear user-friendly to a wide cross section of visitors (Rayport & Jaworski, 2004).

Website content can be classified into three groups based on their relative importance: (a) *Basic factors*: These represent a basic level of acceptable service. Basic as well as advanced features are important to users, as the majority of their interaction is governed by these elements; (b) *Pivotal factors*: These serve to enhance user satisfaction if they are available and likewise result in dissatisfaction if they are absent. Although they are secondary in importance to basic factors, they improve the usability of websites and their absence can result in customer frustration, especially if competitors’ websites utilize them; and, (c) *Supplementary factors*: These have an impact on satisfaction but do not result in frustration if they are not present. These comprise value added OTA features such as a hotel side-by-side comparison tool which aids in the decision-making process and reduces the mental effort output by users and saves time (Benckendorff, 2006). Customers’ attitudes toward the online booking of hotel rooms are reliant on the impact made by the related online booking features (Law & Hsu, 2006).

1.3.1 The advertising properties of hotel descriptions

An online advertisement of superb design is vital to effective communication with potential customers and has a great impact on commercial success of the good or service it serves to publicize” (Hynes & Janson, 2007). With 96% of hotels using third party booking sites (AH&LA, 2012), the pressure to create attractive advertisements has increased. The hotel industry has whole-heartedly welcomed the concept of online advertising, because its success is easily gauged by the application of low cost and computer executed methods; rather than costly market surveys. Its effectiveness can be measured by the communication effect, which is the degree of interest users display toward a product, and by the conversion rate, that is, the proportion of site visitors to the number of transactions (Kim, Park, Kwon, & Chang, 2012). Although it is agreed upon that services have unique characteristics that make them distinguishable from goods (Abernethy & Butler, 1992; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985), only a few researchers have offered detailed insight into the advertising strategies associated with services. The most common recommendation in this regard is to utilize strategies that diminish the intangibility of services (Cutler & Javalgi, 1993; Murray & Schlacter, 1990).

Following the classification of Cook (2001), online advertisements can be described according to a number of criteria, such as medium, technique, type of product, customer profile, among others. *Medium*: The use of the Internet in contrast to other media such as the television is a deciding factor in their structure; *Item advertised*: product versus service. Online advertisements may sell products, or offer services; *Technique*: Products or services sold online may use the hard-sell technique, by directly appealing to the audience, or the soft-sell technique which attempts to influence customer mood and create the impression that the acquisition of the product will increase quality of life”; *Appeal type*: reason vs. tickle; “Reason provides the customer with motives to make a purchase, while tickle plays on the emotions, mood and sense of humor,” nevertheless, ads may employ both appeals.

The two other criteria are: *Consumer profile*: This relates to the socio-economic status of the targeted consumers. In the case of online advertisements the audience comprises computer-savvy and mature individuals who purposefully browse this kind of content, instead of accidental exposure as in the case of radio or print advertisements. This is relevant in determining the style of language utilized, as the designer may not need to attract the users attention through the use of literary devices or catchphrases because the user has intentionally sought the ad; and, *Length*: short versus long copy. Online advertisements are considered long copy because their content is more descriptive and informative, rather than short and catchy (Cook, 2001, p. 15).

With these classification criteria in mind (Cook, 2001), it can be concluded that hotel descriptions on OTAs are indeed advertisements as they are: online based; non-product ads; exploiting the soft-sell technique; with the use of the ‘reason’ appeal; to target computer literate adults from a substantial socio-economic background; who seek out advertisements; of the long copy nature. From these indications, consumers view these descriptions as advertisements and as such, these listings should be evaluated for their consistency and appeal, in the same way a hotelier would scrutinize the work of an agency that it has contracted to produce a 30 or 60 second television advertisement promoting their hotel. In regard to whether advertising material is informative, the conclusion adapted from research by Resnik and Stern (1977) suggests that “it must permit the typical reader to make a more intelligent buying decision after viewing the material than before

seeing it. In other words, it must provide cues that enable readers to better achieve their own personal sets of purchase objectives.”

1.3.1.1 Persuasion and mental imagery processing

The purpose of creating advertisements is to convince customers to purchase the goods or services advertised, and these texts are considered to be argumentative in character, with a variety of linguistic devices utilized to achieve persuasion (Labrador, Ramón, Alaiz-Moretón, & Sanjurjo-González, 2014). Simon (1976, p. 21) defined *persuasion* as “human communication that is designed to influence others by modifying their beliefs, values, or attitudes” (cited in Dainton & Zelly, 2004). More specifically in commerce, it is “an instrumental and intentional form of commercial communication by which a deliberate attempt is made to convince consumers of the value of the message position,” that is, the product, service or brand advertised (Fennis, 2008). As Bagwell (2007) opined, “Advertising can be informative; alter the taste of consumers; reduce the cost to customers in acquiring the information; be complementary to the product being advertised; and can increase the desire for a product without changing its innate characteristics” (cited in Goldfarb, 2014).

Persuasive language is usually captivating and creative, employing maximum use of language resources such as emotive words and metaphors to appeal to the audience. The medium is predominantly textual for online advertisements, although it is often treated as if it were auditory (Janoschka, 2004). Informal language which is commonly used in familiar settings, is used in advertising to connect with potential customers, by communicating with a wide audience as if they are individuals through the utilization of inclusive language techniques (Labrador et al., 2014). In the case of OTAs “get a free night for every ten nights spent with ‘Welcome Rewards’” (Hotels.com, 2014a).

With the myriad techniques used in online advertising, consumers often need to focus in order to do more than just understand the message. Mental imagery processing refers to “high elaboration processing and involves the representation of nonverbal information in working memory” (MacInnis & Price, 1987). This kind of imagery can be stimulated by advertising techniques such as instructions given to the reader to imagine (Babin & Burns, 1997; Bone & Ellen, 1992). Recently, Lee and Morrison (2010) “identified sensory descriptions on destination websites as textual elements that encourage mental imagery processing.” Likewise, the mental image conjured by a customer in relation to a tourism product can serve as a potent source of information in augmenting expectations and encouraging purchasing decisions (Walters, Sparks, & Herington, 2007).

When imagery is stimulated through the use of emotionally stirring product information, it alters the attitudinal judgments of customers in a positive way (McGill & Anand, 1989). It is therefore prudent for tourism marketers to recognize the types of stimuli that encourage mental imagery so that websites can exhibit persuasive content capable of inducing bias in potential customers and increase purchase intention (Lee & Gretzel, 2012). Similarly, through the use of these techniques prospective guests should be capable of forming vivid visualizations which depict positive expectations regarding the guest experience, which can lead to positive attitudes and build confidence in the product. Subsequently, if the likeability factor is high customers may be unconsciously compelled to reject negative persuasion, which is highly plausible considering the persuasive culture of digital word of mouth which has become a staple of the travel information search environment (Xiang &

Gretzel, 2010). As such it is important to create online messages that appeal to the customers' psyche (cited in Lee & Gretzel, 2012)

1.3.2 The importance of texts in hotel listings

Some researchers reported that pictures outperformed text in the function of customers' recall of the products and services companies offer (Edell & Burke, 1987; Unnava & Burnkrant, 1991). Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the potency of text as a medium of persuasion. In contrary to the aforementioned study, marketing research firm Harris Interactive (2005) conducted a hotel booking survey which showed that 71% of respondents ranked "written descriptions of accommodations" as very important compared to 69% for "visuals of the accommodations." The constituents of the genre of online advertisements all share certain textual and contextual features that are particular to the group. Textual features consist of the linguistic elements that are used to define the characteristics of the product and persuade customers of its beneficial virtues (Labrador et al., 2014).

1.3.2.1 The linguistic properties of text

Bhatia defined genre as "language used to give expression to the communicative goals of a discipline through the use of predetermined structures, by way of restricting the use of lexico-grammatical and discoursal resources" (Bhatia, 2004, p. 23), aiding in the identification of subgenres (cited in Labrador et al., 2014). Scholars have made progress toward describing the communicative units of various genres in order to establish a framework for examining the rhetorical structures of particular types of texts, such as sections of research papers (Brett, 1994; Dudley-Evans, 1994), application letters (Upton & Connor, 2001) and letters of recommendation (Precht, 2000).

Texts often follow certain principles that make them identifiable as constituents of a specific genre, especially in professional and scholarly contexts. These principles have very similar structures which dictate the kinds of rhetorical elements used, and the ordering of, and purpose which each element serves. In this way, all online advertisements belonging to the same genre display the same structure of decisive communicative units which are dependent on the context in which it is used. The crafting of online advertisements obliges that the writer/designer is cognizant of the particular rhetorical structure of the genre and the linguistic elements which can be used to persuade the user into patronizing the products offered. A careful choice of phrasal items and the careful combination and arrangement of both persuasive and objective information is vital in this regard (Labrador et al., 2014).

"Main-idea identification is an important intellectual skill in acquiring information from text. Structural features are "the ordering of words in sentences and sentences in the text, as well as rhetorical and graphic devices that mark the functions of specific sentences and the organization of the text as a whole" (Goldman, Saul, & Coté, 1995), which enable an audience to "gain access" to a text, such as, headings and bullet points. In simpler terms text must be arranged into paragraphs with headings used to signal the focus of the content which follows.

1.3.3 The role of color

"Color theory" is the "interaction of colors in a design through complementation, contrast, and vibrancy" (Cannon, 2012). Following the advent of the computer and monitor, and

their role in user interaction, the importance of visual perception became a widely researched topic (e.g. (Norman, 2002)). How customers perceive a website is dependent to a great extent on its visual qualities because it is said that over 75% of the information collected by the brain of users is derived through sight (Mattelart, 1996). Web design is a balance between the functional and aesthetic, with concepts such as aesthetically pleasant color combinations reputed to play a part in engendering positive sentiments in users, which is crucial for commercial website (Hall & Hanna, 2004b). A logical connection between the readability of content and the retention of the information is evident, because the first is incapable of occurring without the other. In this regard the contrast between the various elements should also impact retention in a desirable way (Hall & Hanna, 2004b).

In web page design, the combination of background and text color is critical as it affects the accessibility and users impression of the information (Manhas & Sarwar, 2012). Practical experiments which altered the background pictures and colors of a web page to varying extremes were found to impact product choice. It was concluded that these changes had a bearing on experts as well as amateurs to the web, although this effect could be explained differently for each user group. The researchers noted that even slight changes in the onscreen display can influence a switch in the products selected by both groups (Mandel & Johnson, 2002). Cyr (2008) found that the pleasant visual design of a website, with a special emphasis on colors, positively impacted trust levels, as well as satisfaction and subsequent loyalty in website visitors.

1.4 The common themes in the hotel description genre

Guests booking a hotel through an OTA can choose a hotel on their own from an extensive selection. They are able to peruse hotel related information on the site, and can view the reviews published by others who have made prior purchases. If a hotel has a good number of positive reviews, customers may be convinced that the hotel is likely to offer superior service and may even be persuaded into paying a higher price than they had intended as a result of the confidence gained from the information presented (Yacouel & Fleischer, 2012). Corporate identity was found to impact the way in which travelers perceived and evaluated a service provider; and in this regard, hotel name, affiliation and service reputation were the factors that contributed to a positive image. Since these elements have been proven to impact the expectations of travelers regarding service quality, hoteliers must ensure that OTAs continually promote these factors in all their listings since they have the potential to influence the choice behavior of potential customers (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1996).

1.4.1 Categories of hotel information

Besides reviews, other kinds of information are made available on OTA websites. Rong et al. (2009) came up with five variables in order to identify respondents' perceptions of the relative importance of different types of hotel website information. The general dimensions include: a) Facilities Information; b) Reservation Information; c) Contact Information; d) Surrounding Area Information; and e) Website Management. Hotel Facilities Information: a general description of the hotel property and information on the facilities and amenities available to guests. Reservation Information comprises the website features which provide transaction related information such as price and facilitate online reservations. Contact Information consists of the facilities that enable one to one communication between hoteliers and clients. Surrounding Area Information details

information related to the nearby amenities. Website Management referred to the accessibility, relevance and maintenance of website content.

1.4.1.1 Facilities and amenities

The services, facilities and amenities offered by a hotel, are known as attributes, and the virtues of their characteristics are what encourage customers to select one brand versus another (Lewis, 1983). Furthermore, technology has been consistently cited as a key determinant in hotel guest satisfaction (Singh & Kasavana, 2005) and hotel choice (Cobanoglu, 2001). Hotels employ technology to provide value-added offerings in a bid to improve guest satisfaction and loyalty, and differentiate themselves from the competition (Cobanoglu, Ryan, & Beck, 1999). Guestroom technologies include electronic meal ordering, self wake-up systems, self check-out, electronic entertainment services, and so on. Technology has enhanced in-room services, and increased entertainment and service offerings; earning additional revenue for hotels. The availability of these services is dependent on a number of variables, including hotel location. In this regard city hotels, whose guest are predominantly business travelers, are more likely to offer upscale in room technology in contrast to rural or resort hotels (Lee, Barker, & Kandampully, 2003). It has therefore become important for hotels to identify the amenities, services, and technological applications demanded by travelers and assess their impact on guest satisfaction.

It has always been a challenge for hotel food and beverage operations to be profitable on their own, yet the implementation of proven best practices such as display kitchens, upgraded table tops, seasonal food and beverage promotions, wine lists and the retention of talented culinary professionals can turn around a struggling outlet. Hotels often have formal as well as informal restaurants, hosting gourmet restaurants and steak houses, accompanied by a free-standing or table side bar. Just over a decade ago guests were passionate about themed restaurants, for example “Bocelli’s” (Italian restaurant) which were said to transport the guest to another country, setting or even culture, with the experience intended to replicate the feelings, sounds and taste the guest would enjoy at the actual locale (Siguaw & Enz, 1999).

In a study done by Mason and Roberts (2004), the dimension ‘hotel information’ recorded the majority of expressions of dissatisfaction in hotel booking. Guests were unsatisfied with the quantity of information provided about the property, its facilities and location. Lack of information about hotel facilities accounted for more than 50% of the dissatisfaction, but comprised just three issues; of which lack of information about the hotel itself, and room specification were the most worrisome.

1.4.1.2 Surrounding information

1.4.1.2.1 Attractions

For tourists, hotels serve as homes away from their primary abode, and are the focal point from which the bulk of tourism activity originates in a destination (Jansen-Verbeke, 1986). Tourist attractions are a pivotal dimension in the successful development of tourism zones and tourism systems in general (Leiper, 1990). Tourist attractions consist of the “non-home” elements of a destination that pull travelers away from their customary places of residence. These attractions include activities that visitors can participate in, landscapes for their exploration and viewing pleasure, and experiences to take with them (Lew, 1987). A city’s historic core comprises its major cultural institutions such as museums, its business districts, shopping zones, and parks which form the main attractions of the urban

tourism offering (Shoval & Raveh, 2004). Arbel and Pizam (1977) argued nearly 40 years ago that most tourists wanted to be within walking distance of major attractions and sought hotels that were close to them.

1.4.1.2.2 Transportation

Scholars such as Gunn (1988) and Inskeep (1991) have identified the infrastructural foundations of a country as a possible determinant of destination attractiveness; a vital component of which is transportation infrastructure. Given that the visitors journey to and from the destination is an important aspect of the overall travel process, this is of premium importance. Transportation infrastructure is considered the vehicular, nautical (sea) and air transport facilities; which form a fundamental part of the tourism package. Robust road infrastructure enables tourist to travel to the various regions within the destination, while airport infrastructure facilitates a smooth switchover from the aircraft into the destination's borders and back (Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2007). The nature of the holiday and the kind of destination, is a determinant of the mode of transportation and travel options available to tourists (Gouveia-Barros, 2012). Tsaur and Tzeng (1996) demonstrated that location factors, which include parking availability and convenient ground transportation, were important in assessing hotel service quality.

1.5 Information provision in hotel listings

The tourism industry is information intensive in nature and depends on the use of various communication channels to market its offerings and build relationships with customers (Poon, 1994). The Internet has acceded to the status of the leading source of travel information (Fesenmaier et al., 2011), and is on its way to becoming the most dynamic sales and marketing distribution channel in hospitality and tourism. It has been a vehicle of progress, influencing the information search and purchase behavior of travelers (Lee & Morrison, 2010). It is therefore essential for hoteliers to know what type of information to include in media and communications directed at travelers, in order to fuel the decision-making process (Molina, Gómez, & Martín-Consuegra, 2010).

1.5.1 The properties of information

Information is a complex concept that has provoked a never ending debate whose origins trace back to antiquity. Rocchi (2011) declares that “authors have not come into accord on a common definition” and that “they still quarrel over the method of study, the theoretical assumptions, the application ranges, and the scopes of their inquiries.” Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study it is prudent to define the concept as it pertains to tourist travel decision-making. Lombardi (2004) so succinctly opined that “it seems that we all precisely know what information is.” She goes on to state that, the explosion in telecommunications and computer sciences endows the concept of information with a scientific prestige that makes supposedly unnecessary any further explanation. Still, she puts forth the definition of Bell (1957, p. 7) that “information is measured as a difference between the state of knowledge of the recipient before and after the communication of information.”

Information quality weighs heavily on the perception of a website's quality. Resnik and Stern (1977) defined information content as “cues that enable viewers to better achieve their own personal sets of purchase objectives. Information ‘cues’ are the units of information which enable customers to compare and contrast products in order to make an informed decision. One task confronting website professionals is deciding on the information cues that should be present on their sites, as well as the kinds of cues that

confuse visitors during their decision-making endeavors (Hasley & Gregg, 2010). Salaün and Flores (2001) suggest that information “must be *reliable* and trustworthy, and its compliance with established standards and controls are necessary to prove reliability.” They continue that “the purpose of *relevance* is to meet the needs and requirements of customers quickly and *accurately*.” The authors further opine that “*accessibility* of information can be measured by the cost the customer has to assume in order to access the information, and the way by which it reaches to the customer.”

1.5.1.1 Information barriers

Although travelers make use of external information sources during the very first phase of holiday planning (Goossens, 1995), they are oftentimes swamped by the deluge of information available online (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2000) and the experience can become frustrating (Radosevich, 1999) and serve as a deterrent to booking (cited in Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Additionally, the customers’ perceptions of the risk factors may result in purchasing delays, or a total rejection of online shopping (Heijden, Verhagen, & Creemers, 2003). To diminish these risks, customers seek information online regarding the performance, quality, and functionality of the product. The fact is, information gathering greatly decreases risk perception (Dowling & Staelin, 1994), and besides, information acquisition plays a role in supporting a purchase decision.

Research conducted over a decade ago showed that many e-commerce sites were poor in usability and failed to satisfy customer expectations (Cho & Park, 2001; Kim & Eom, 2002). Zona Research (1999) survey results of online shopping showed that 62% of shoppers have been deterred by undesirable conditions which existed during the shopping process and 42% had resorted to conventional retail channels for their purchases. A similar study showed that prospective customers decided against making an online purchase in a third of instances (Nielsen 1998), resulting in the loss of potential revenue for the e-commerce business (cited in Liu et al., 2003).

An investigation of existing studies have revealed contradictory conclusions concerning the quantity of information that should be made available on a website in a effort to reduce risk perception, and empower customers to make savvy purchase decisions. In one way, increasing the availability of information online is proven to improve a customer’s capacity to act on their needs, as well as consider a wider range of products (Trocchia & Janda, 2003); which improves the customers perception of the online experience and culminates in a transaction that brings satisfaction. In another way, an excess of information with no means of sorting through it (Lee & Lee, 2004) complicates the process of finding the relevant information even though it has been provided on the website (Ranganathan & Ganapathy, 2002; Yang, Peterson, & Cai, 2003), and this in turn has a negative impact on the perception of the website even though attempts were made to provide an adequate amount of information.

When faced with situations characterized by much uncertainty, customers profit most from unambiguous and consistent information that serve to decrease or eliminate uncertainty and lower the risks related to making an error in choice, as in the case where a customer books fast-paced, highly technological hotel with extensive facilities where a smaller more personalized atmosphere and service were sought (Cho, Kang, & Cheon, 2006; Tversky & Shafir, 1992), leading to dissatisfaction simply because the information about the property was presented in a manner which suggest a homely environment (cited in van Rompay, de Vries, & van Venrooij, 2010). Scholars who have tested the Model of

Information System Success authored by DeLone and McLean (1992) have identified a correlation between information quality and decision-making performance (Etezadi-Amoli & Farhoomand, 1996; Teo & Wong, 1998). The model purports that supplying the “right” information to customers through a website, could drastically impact the perceived usability of a website, and consequently improve the users’ ability to decide what products to purchase and from whom they should be bought.

After considering questions such as, “Does my website provide the same information that my competitors do?,” “What relative importance do my customers assign to the information points presented at my website?,” or “How do various mixes of information content influence visitor perceptions and behaviors?,” Hasley and Gregg (2010) designed a survey instrument to gain a general idea of the kinds of information cues that are normally found on e-commerce websites. The resulting Website Information Content Survey (WICS) tool is said to help business executives in making a comprehensive assessment of their websites. The answers to the questions above can have important consequences. For instance, the results of the study suggested that particular information cues that appear obvious and straightforward to web designers may be considered confusing or vague to users.

Companies that maintain commercial websites not only aim to target consumers with experience and who frequently shop online, but also those who do not (Chen, Hsu, & Lin, 2010). For this reason, information provision systems such as websites, must reflect on its level of accessibility to all user groups, and should integrate the needs, objectives and preferences of each target group (Kim & Ong, 2005). For commercial websites, “success depends upon understanding how customers use information to make decisions about what products to buy, what company to buy them from, and whether or not to purchase the product online” (Montoya-Weiss, Voss, & Grewal, 2003). Satisfaction with the online service experience was higher when website information content was extensive (Shankar, Smith, & Rangaswamy, 2003), increasing the likelihood of repeat visits (cited in Beldona et al., 2005). Research has proven that the final choice of holiday destination depends on the quality and quantity of information made available to and exploited by the travelers (Etzel & Wahlers, 1985; Gitelson & Perdue, 1987; Raitz & Dakhil, 1989).

A proven method of research into services advertising is content analysis, a process that reveals insight into this area. For example Grove, Pickett, and Laband (1995) found that advertisements for service comprised more informational and factual cues, whereas (Abernethy & Butler, 1992) found less informational cues in their advertisements. Furthermore, Zinkhan, Johnson, and Zinkhan (1993) and Cutler and Javalgi (1993) stated that “emotional or transformational appeals are more utilized in services advertising than for goods.” Zinkhan et al. (1993) also determined that services use transformational appeals more than informational appeals. Even though the findings of content analysis research regarding information cues in advertising are inconsistent, the authors attribute this fault to the intangible nature of services. In conclusion, intangibility and tactics to compensate for it, are a well researched theme in services advertising (cited Stafford, 1996).

1.6 Summary of literature

The Internet serves as a hosting point for travel suppliers like OTAs, and through the usage of computers and search engines consumers connect with them and carry out business transactions. Statistics show the extent and potential of the online travel industry,

and demonstrate why the OTA should be regarded and studied as a pertinent source of tourist information. OTAs are in essence search engines of a specific nature, which satisfy the motivation behind consumers' online search; the quest for information retrieval which helps in travel decision-making.

It has become evident that OTAs were not created as a source of information, but rather as a digital form of the traditional travel agency engineered to expand their market base. Nevertheless, in order to survive in the world of e-commerce, businesses must strive to provide more than just the basic website functions needed to facilitate a transaction. The linguistic and visual elements of website content can influence purchase intention, and the literature shows that even consumers who do not intend to book through an OTA will use the site to gain information about the accommodation available in a destination. Consumers from various backgrounds use websites and regardless of the motive for shopping, the informativeness of the site is of great importance. OTAs have contributed to the travel decision-making process by pooling various travel related information components and providing analytical tools thereby simplifying and expediting the process. In addition to information, website qualities such as ease of use and attractiveness influence consumers' decision-making processes.

The provision of quality information can be hampered by factors associated with website design. By understanding how customers view the various aspects of website design, not just the textual information, it is easier to perceive the usefulness of the elements of OTA websites which this study seeks to catalogue. While a hotel website is capable of providing detailed information across multiple pages, OTAs are disadvantaged in that they face the challenge of providing comprehensive information in a restricted space. Notwithstanding, it is now known that OTAs are a comprehensive source of travel information providing products and services in all major functional areas, utilizing a variety of tools to help consumers in decision-making. In spite of the nuances, the OTA-hotelier relationship is a mutually beneficial one worth continuing. It has been recognized that OTAs are a fixture of the tourism landscape for the foreseeable future, and the need for OTAs to acknowledge their role as information providers is now more vital than ever.

1.7 Analysis of the literature

The balanced arguments presented by scholars regarding the OTA-hotelier relationship are admirable (Anderson, 2011; Lee, Guillet, & Law, 2013), as it would be irresponsible to vilify a distribution channel which in itself has spin-off marketing benefits for the hotel; with reservations on a hotel website itself increasing as a result of the hotel being listed on a third party site. On the other hand, the studies that evaluated OTA website dimensions focused on usability (Cho & Agrusa, 2006; Park et al., 2007), and pricing (Clemons et al., 2002; Yacouel & Fleischer, 2012), rather than the provision of information.

A search of literature related to website features and quality will show that hotel websites have been researched extensively while OTA websites received little attention in comparison. Nevertheless, Kaynama and Black (2000) claimed to measure website quality for both OTAs and traditional travel agencies which maintained websites using a new scale E-QUAL, which is similar to SERVQUAL that is used to evaluate services. A closer look at the study's empirical design revealed uncertainty about the application and inner workings of E-QUAL; as the authors only presented a simple diagram with the dimensions of E-QUAL and their parallel to SERVQUAL, with no details given regarding the components of each dimension. Similarly, Cho and Agrusa (2006) measured the effect of perceived usefulness and ease of use on overall customer attitudes toward the websites of

OTA and the impact on satisfaction. Both factors were found to have an impact on customer attitudes, and satisfaction as well. One discrepancy with the studies method is the absence of the scale that was used to measure the attitudes toward the stated factors. Similarly, the authors did not detail specific website features which had a positive impact on users, and thereby influenced their attitudes toward the site. So, if a hotelier were to attempt to use the study to improve their website, it would be impossible as the theoretical concepts that contributed to usability were not translated into plain website features such as search boxes and their contribution to finding content.

Chung and Law (2003) sought to “quantitatively evaluate the performance of hotel websites in the context of the sites’ information richness” and surveyed hotel managers of various hotel categories to ascertain the level of importance they assigned to each website dimension, such as facilities information. What is unclear from the study is the importance of the dimensions in what context, as the authors simply wrote that the hoteliers “were then asked to rate the importance of the five dimensions and their associated attributes.” The question is; is it the personal importance that hoteliers would attribute to each dimension if they were to book a hotel, or is it their pertinence to the accomplishment of the business objectives of their hotel, or perhaps how hoteliers perceive customers would rank these dimensions? It is very likely that the dimensions would be ranked differently if the context were to be specified or changed. Zafiroopoulos and Vrana (2006) in a similar study went on to contrast hoteliers’ rankings against those given by users; recording slight differences. Just as in the aforementioned study, the authors simply issued a questionnaire and stated that, “The managers were able to evaluate the information services and the information dimensions provided through the web.” Nevertheless, it is unclear what is the significance of the users’ rankings to the research, because conclusions were only drawn based on the hoteliers’ rankings, with no relation between the two. Perhaps, if hotel managers were asked to rank the dimensions based on how they feel customers perceived them, then a different and more relevant conclusion could be that hoteliers are disillusioned concerning the perception of customers regarding the importance of website dimensions.

The Internet is a relatively new phenomenon and as such it can be observed that many principles for advertising have not been tailored to it, but rather taken directly from print advertising. Maybe then it is not safe to generalize the results of a study and apply it to a similar area; for example product research to services research. In this regard, researchers seemed to be united regarding the superiority of pictures in contrast to text on websites, in regard to their impact on customers’ recall of the products and services companies offer through online advertising, with Edell and Burke (1987), Unnava and Burnkrant (1991), and Pieters and Wedel (2004) promoting this affirmation. Nevertheless, these scholars did not evaluate these dimensions in the hotel booking context. Recent research by marketing research firm Harris Interactive (2005) has rebutted the generalization of these findings to online hotel booking. A survey to determine the “importance of factors in selecting a hotel online” found that 71% of those samples rated “written descriptions of the accommodations” as very important compared to 69% who considered “visuals of the accommodation” as very important. Still, this may be a comparison of apples to oranges; recall versus importance ranking. Nevertheless, texts provide concrete information about a hotel offering in comparison to the varying interpretations readers often apply to pictures.

On the other extreme, the literature does not show that scholars consider descriptions on OTAs to be advertisements, but yet their characteristics fit the classifications of online advertisements (e.g. Cook, 2001). Studies have only perceived advertisements to be

graphical items posted randomly on web pages promoting a company unrelated to the content of the current web page. Perhaps if hotel descriptions were examined to ascertain their unique advertising characteristics, then scholars of hospitality research would have a new genre to explore. Just as scholars have catalogued the structures and rhetoric which characterize other genres, so too can the same be done for hotel descriptions, in a bid to standardize their form and ensure that the principle of discourse are being adhered. In doing so, it is ensured that they are formulated in a manner which is attractive to users, and have the greatest impact on readability, retention and purchase intention.

Authors oftentimes create their own categories and items for customers to assess in relation to hotel facilities and amenities, however, these categories have been chosen by the researcher and are therefore not an absolute indicator of what customers consider when assessing the offerings of a hotel. It would therefore be wise to begin such studies with open ended questions to gauge what dimension customers internalize, then use a content analysis to group these entries into themes, which would enable researchers to include customer generated items that would hold more relevance. A study by Otegbulu and Tenigbade (2011) included items such as regular water and electricity supply, which were chosen as the two most important offerings, followed by location. Would it then be logical to assume that location is of secondary importance when choosing a hotel? Similarly, Bulchand-Gidumal, Melián-González, and López-Valcárcel (2011) declared that business centers and room service did not matter to travelers, however, the fact that these items ranked at the bottom of the results list, does not legitimize the assumption that they do not have a bearing on the decision-making process. If perhaps this study asked the participants to divide the items into basic and convenience requirements, the rankings could have a different outcome. If hot tub ranks last on a list, this does not automatically signal that it does not influence the decision-making process.

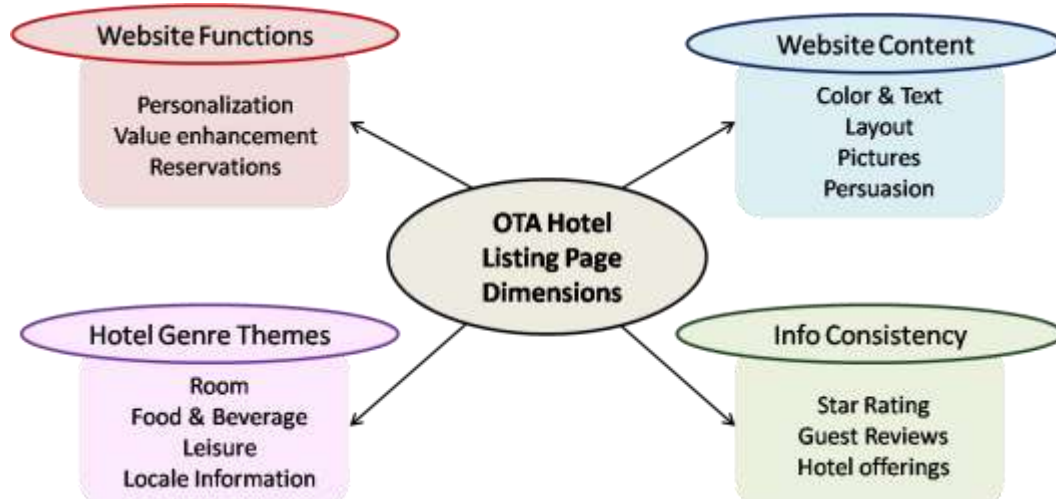
Mason and Roberts (2004) reported that a lack of hotel information was one of the main causes of frustration in the hotel booking process; especially about its services and amenities. The study stated that issues relating to room specifications were a major concern; however, it did not seek to ascertain what kind of details were lacking about the room. Under this dimension the author stated three vague items, two of which were “not enough information” and “exact specifications.” Further review of literature in this area has not revealed a catalogue of the details that customers find lacking in relation to amenities, for example, size and type of TV or kind of mattress. If the issue of information provision is to be solved, this would be a prudent starting point. On a similar note, Ku and Fan (2009) posited that information provision was the greatest indicator of customer service yet their survey instrument featured nine areas (the top three were privacy, safety, and product quality) with none of the dimensions encompassing information provision.

Table 1.1 summarizes the theoretical dimensions which have a bearing on the fulfillment of the research questions, along with scholars who have carried out studies in this regard. The simple model in Figure 1.1 assists in framing these dimensions in relation to the methodological section and the proceeding results.

Table 1.1. Summary of the theoretical considerations surrounding the research questions

Theoretical considerations relevant to answering the Research Questions	
Online Travel Agencies	
a) OTA functions	Anderson (2011); Pan et al. (2013)
b) OTA-hotelier relationship	Choi and Kimes (2002); Lee et al. (2013)
Website Dimensions	
c) Evaluation of dimensions	Chung and Law (2003); Zafiropoulos and Vrana (2006)
d) Factors that influence purchase intention	Liu and Arnett (2000); Blake, Neuendorf, and Valdiserri (2005); Chen et al. (2010)
Website Content	
e) Basic service factors	Benckendorff (2006)
f) Advertising principles	Luk, Tam, and Wong (1996); Cook (2001); Mattila (2001)
g) Pictures	Stringam and Jr (2010); Mandel and Johnson (2002)
h) Layout	Lawrence and Tavakol (2007) Hartley and Trueman (1985); Goldman et al. (1995)
i) Persuasion	Lee and Gretzel (2012); Labrador et al. (2014)
j) Impact of color on readability, retention & purchase intention	Babin, Hardesty, and Suter (2003); Hall and Hanna (2004); Pelet and Papadopoulou (2012); Manhas and Sarwar (2012)
Hotel Description Genre	
k) Hotel website info. categories	Rong et al. (2009)
l) Hotel facilities and amenities	Otegbulu and Tenigbade (2011); Berezina and Cobanoglu (2010)
m) Attractions	Shoval and Raveh (2004); Shoval, McKercher, Ng, and Birenboim (2011)
n) Transportation	Khadaroo and Seetanah (2007);
o) Quality indicators: review/star	
Information	
p) Properties	Hasley and Gregg (2010); Salaün and Flores (2001)
q) Consistency	Mason and Roberts (2004); Chen and Schwartz (2006)

Figure 1.1. Theoretical model showing the dimensions of hotel listing pages to be examined



2 PRESENTATION OF THE CASE

2.1 Countries

The study samples five online travel agencies to conduct a content analysis of the hotel listings of 30 hotels located around the cities of Esbjerg in Denmark, Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, and Girona in northern Spain, with special focus on the hotel descriptions. The countries chosen represent three regions of Europe: Scandinavia, Central Europe and the Mediterranean. One will see that Spain is the most dependent on tourism, with the largest as well as most competitive tourism sector, while Denmark recorded the highest level of investments in tourism, tourist arrivals per capita and overnight stays (see Table 2.1, Table 2.2, and Table 2.3). Slovenia had the highest number of bed places per capita.

2.1.1 Denmark

Denmark is well known for its cycling culture which has permeated everyday life, as well as its rainy weather and frequent snowfall in winter, and the green culture for which it has been regionally and internationally recognized. With its 43,000 square kilometers (26,700 sq. miles) of terrain, it is considered a small country, having a population of just 5.6 million inhabitants. Although part of the European Union, Denmark still uses Danish kroner as its currency. It is admired for “its social balance, equality, low levels of corruption, transparency, and universal welfare services” (Denmark.dk, 2014). Tourism arrivals exceeded 8 million in 2012 (UNWTO, 2014).

2.1.1.1 Esbjerg

Esbjerg is Denmark’s 5th largest city, located in the country’s southwest. It is a busy shipping, fishing and oil port, having a population of 71,000. Esbjerg serves as a base for tourists wishing to venture to Ribe and Southwest Jutland, as well as the famous Wadden Sea National Park. In summer, it hosts “seal safaris,” fish auctions, ship races, art festivals and music concerts (Visitesbjerg.dk, 2014).

2.1.2 Slovenia

Slovenia is located in the heart of Europe close to the Alps (Slovenia.info, 2014b). The tagline “I feel *Slovenia*” is the country’s primary advertising slogan. Slovenia is said to have one of the highest concentrations of religious buildings on the continent, with close to 3,000 churches and religious monuments around the country. Slovenia is fortunate to have a diverse tourism offering which means “in a single day you can pick autumn fruits in the morning, bathe in the Adriatic in the afternoon, and go night skiing in the evening” (Slovenia.info, 2014a). The country welcomed 2.2 million visitors in 2013 (UNWTO, 2014).

2.1.2.1 Ljubljana

Ljubljana has a population of 283,000, and as a capital is relatively small in area, with the centre of attraction being its “Old Town.” It has its origin in Roman times as the city of Emona, with many relics remaining today. Ljubljana Castle holds a very privileged position, sitting on a hill overlooking the city. The destination is famous for its vibrant culture with many events and is recognized for its efforts toward sustainability. It holds the number 2 spot on Lonely Planet’s “Best in Europe” 2014 list (Ljubljana.com, 2014).

2.1.3 Spain

Spain is the 4th largest of 49 European countries and is home to 47 million people. Spain hosted 60.6 million international visitors in 2012 and was the 3rd most visited destination in the world (UNWTO, 2014). It is renowned for its gastronomy as well as its long summers owing to its Mediterranean location. Highlights on a visit to Spain include stops at its museums, beaches, as well as its many Michelin star restaurants. The islands off the coast of Spain are very popular with the younger crowd who converge in the summer for parties (Spain.info, 2014).

2.1.3.1 Girona

The city of Girona is the capital of the province of the same name. Its most iconic attraction is the Girona Cathedral which is located in the touristic “Old Town.” Girona serves as the starting point for exploring Barcelona and the Costa Brava region. Girona restaurant, El Celler de Can Roca is the world’s number one restaurant with three Michelin stars. The region is also the birthplace of Dali, world renowned artist, with a museum in the nearby city of Figueres (Girona.cat, 2014).

2.1.4 Tourism development

The Danish economy showed signs of weakness during the first half of 2013 due to the European debt crisis, but a quick recovery in the latter part of the year resulted in the recording of overall economic growth. While outbound and domestic tourism thrived during the same period, inbound tourism experienced a decrease due to a significant fall in arrivals from the primary origin market, Germany. Nevertheless, online sales of tourism products and services have been on the rise, while offline sales have experienced a decrease. The high rate of Internet penetration in Denmark and an increased trust in Internet retailing have been the catalysts behind this positive development. In 2013, “the average daily rate and occupancy rate increased for hotels in all regions of the country” and continued growth is forecasted for the hotel sector up to 2018. Still, the prospects are less than desired due to high prices and “the lack of ‘5-star’ service level and other attractions” (Euromonitor International, 2014a).

Slovenia realized record tourist arrivals in 2012 (up 14%), and a 4% increase in tourist expenditure as a result of a successful “I feel Slovenia” marketing campaign, and the status of its second largest city Maribor, as “European Capital of Culture” for 2012. In the same period domestic tourism figures showed an 8% increase over the previous year, nevertheless, a 5 year forecast has predicted slow growth in this area. Visits to attractions rose by 2% with casinos accounting for the largest share of total sales. In contrary to regional trends, the majority of accommodation sales were transacted offline (95%) due to price sensitive tourists avoiding the pricey online intermediaries. Still, the use of online channels saw a 10% growth. The Slovene government is conducting a 5 year campaign to brand Slovenia as a sustainable destination in hopes of increasing tourist arrivals, with arrivals expected to increase gradually over this period ending 2017 (Euromonitor International, 2014b).

While the Spanish economy is suffering from high rates of unemployment, decreases in salary and high taxation, domestic tourism numbers have held steadfast with a shift in preference for low cost carriers and private accommodation; resulting in decreased expenditures. Nevertheless, outbound tourists to the region increased, with a decrease in trips to long haul destinations. Inbound tourism is on the rise as a result of strong tourism

promotion and simplified visa procedures, with increased arrivals from as far off as Mexico and Brazil. Last minute bookings have also increased, further signaling the level of uncertainty plaguing the economy, with online bookings showing rapid growth. The number of arrivals is expected to increase due to continued investments in a bid to enhance the tourism offering to meet the demands of being one of the top ten receiving countries in the world (Euromonitor International, 2014c).

Table 2.1. Tourism economy statistics

Country	Figures for 2013		Contribution to Tourism 2013			
	Population (mil)	GDP per capita (€) *	GDP direct %	GDP total %	Employment direct %	Employment total %
Denmark	5.6	41,517	2.0	7.2	2.9	8.3
Slovenia	2.1	16,394	3.6	12.8	4.0	13.1
Spain	46.2	21,636	5.7	15.7	5.2	15.8

*converted from USD at an exchange rate of 0.74€ to \$1

Source: (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2014)

Table 2.2. Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index rankings

Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index							
Country	TTCI overall score	Regulatory framework		Business environment & infrastructure		Human, cultural & natural resources	
	Rank/144	Rank/144	Score/7	Rank/144	Score/7	Rank/144	Score/7
Denmark	21	25	5.3	26	5.48	16	5.12
Slovenia	36	33	4.98	35	5.30	62	4.52
Spain	4	14	4.64	5	5.36	6	4.11

Source: (World Economic Forum, 2013)

Table 2.3. Tourism sector statistics 2013

Country	Tourist arrivals '000		Overnight stays '000		Bed places '000		Investments '000	
	Total	p.c.	Total	p.c.	Total	p.c.	Total	p.c.
Denmark	8,242	1.47	44,610	7.90	130	0.02	3,000	583.70
Slovenia	2,258	1.06	5,962	2.80	122	0.06	743	353.90
Spain	56,503	1.22	185,600	4.01	1,431	0.03	14,000	303.03

Source: (INE, 2014; SI-STAT, 2014; StatisticsDenmark, 2013; World Travel and Tourism Council, 2014)

2.2 Online travel agencies (OTAs)

A total of five OTAs are featured in the study. The aim is to examine each to provide an analysis of the websites elements featured and to discover patterns in their style of hotel descriptions. Booking.com tops the list in terms of traffic with an estimated 40 million unique visitors monthly, with Travelocity.com at the lower end rounding out at 14 million visitors (see Table 2.4).

Table 2.4. Key OTA statistics

OTA	Year founded	Users* mil	Revenue \$USD '13 **	Hotel listings '000***
Booking	1999	40	6.8B	477
Expedia	1996	25	4.8B	150
Hotels	1991	16	4.8B	240
Priceline	1998	20	6.8B	200
Travelocity	1996	14	3.0B	150

*July 2014 figures for estimated unique monthly visitors

** Profit for parent company Priceline Inc which owns Booking.com as well, Sabre Holdings which owns Travelocity, and Expedia Inc. which also owns Hotels.com.

Source: (Bloomberg BusinessWeek, 2014a, 2014b; Booking.com, 2014a; Expedia, 2014c; Gale Encyclopedia of E-Commerce, 2002; Hotels.com, 2014a; NASDAQ, 2014; Priceline.com, 2014; Sabre Holdings, 2014; The eBusiness Guide, 2014)

2.2.1 Booking.com

Booking.com is a part of the Priceline group which is based in Amsterdam, Netherlands and is supported by 130 offices in 150 countries. In addition to the traditional themes, guests to the site can browse by destination themes such as fine dining, shopping, monuments, nature, beach and diving. The site features over 477,000 accommodation providers in 202 countries (Booking.com, 2014a), and does not charge registration fees, subscriptions or impose any fixed costs on its partners. Booking.com routes guests' payment details directly to the hotel and submits a commission invoice to the property each month. Similarly, the site does not charge a booking fee to guests. The site boasts operation in 41 languages and realizes the sale of 650,000 room nights daily. The company states that its mission is to, "To help leisure and business travelers, whatever their budgets, easily discover, book, and enjoy the world's best places to stay" (Booking.com, 2014b). Unlike other sites it specializes solely in the sale of accommodation and features unconventional types such as farm stays and camp sites.

2.2.2 Expedia.com

Expedia.com is owned by the American-based Expedia Inc. which also operates other travel services. It was founded in 1996 and now boasts localized sites serving 31 countries providing flights, hotel, car rental, cruise, activities, attractions and services (Expedia, 2014c). Hotels can be listed on Expedia as a Global Distribution System (GDS) hotel or through an Expedia Special Rate (ESR) listing. ESR listings are free as the Expedia revenue model is based on bookings, not fees. Expedia partners with two GDS systems: Worldspan and Pegasus, and allows hotels to participate with one or both GDS. "Content about the property is stored on the Expedia site by way of downloads transmitted by the GDS." In addition to online bookings, Expedia operates a call centre (Expedia, 2014b). Expedia now features over 150,000 properties worldwide (Expedia, 2014a).

2.2.3 Priceline.com

Priceline.com which was founded in 1998 belongs to US based parent company Priceline Inc. and is famous for its bidding function which allows customers to "name their own price." It boasts 200,000 hotels in 12,000 cities around the world. 'Priceline Sponsored Listings' is a pay per click program, which allows a particular hotel listing to be featured

in the first spots of the destination results. Hotels pay when a browser clicks on the ad, meaning free advertising when the ad is not clicked (Priceline.com, 2014). Priceline Inc, the parent company, spends heavily on television advertising which prominently features its spokesperson William Shatner as “The Negotiator.” It also invests in online advertisements by Google, with a budget of USD \$1.8billion in 2013 (Edwards, 2014).

2.2.4 Hotels.com

The Hotel Reservations Network, the predecessor of Hotels.com was founded in 1991. The company focused on offering discount prices for hotels in major U.S. cities via a toll-free phone service (Hotels.com, 2014b). It became a part of Expedia Inc in 2001. Hotels.com lists more than 240,000 bookable properties. The group boasts 85 localized sites in 40 languages, as well as 18 Facebook pages and 13 Twitter feeds. The website claims to “feature more than 11 million unique user-generated reviews from those who have actually stayed in the hotels to ensure customers can make an informed choice when booking.” ‘Welcome Rewards’ is their customer loyalty program. Members earn one point for each night spent at participating properties that have been booked through the website, and for every 10 nights spent a free night is earned which is redeemable at close to 100,000 partners worldwide (Hotels.com, 2014a).

2.2.5 Travelocity.com

Travelocity is based in the United States and belongs to parent company Sabre Holdings. The company was established in 1996 as a joint venture between Sabre Interactive and Worldview Systems Corp. Sabre served as one of the most popular reservation systems used by travel agents (Gale Encyclopedia of E-Commerce, 2002). In 1995, Sabre began offering a service which gave consumers access to the same information used by travel agents. It is said to be the second largest online travel agency, serving primarily leisure travelers. According to the parent site, “Travelers can research, shop and book approximately 325 airlines, 105,000 hotels, all major car rental companies, cruise lines and numerous vacation and last-minute travel packages as well as access traveler reviews and other travel-related services” (Sabre Holdings, 2014). In August 2013, Travelocity entered a marketing agreement with Expedia Inc., wherein Expedia provides “content, technology and customer service” for its United States and Canadian markets (Jones, 2013).

2.3 Hotels in the sample

Denmark, Slovenia and Spain have 593, 713 and 14,785 hotels respectively (only hotels with over 10 bed and 40 beds accounted for in the case of the first two) with the majority of these located in key tourist regions (INE, 2014; SI-STAT, 2014; StatisticsDenmark, 2013). The hotels selected (see Table 2.5, Table 2.6 and Table 2.7) represent a mix of large and small properties, of chain or independent affiliation, located in city centers as well as suburbs (see Figure 2.1, Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3). The hotel star rating distribution accurately represents that of each destination. A total of 150 descriptions will be analyzed to identify patterns, similarities and differences among them. Every attempt was made to ensure that the hotels were distributed as proportionately as possible among attributes such as affiliation and number of rooms.

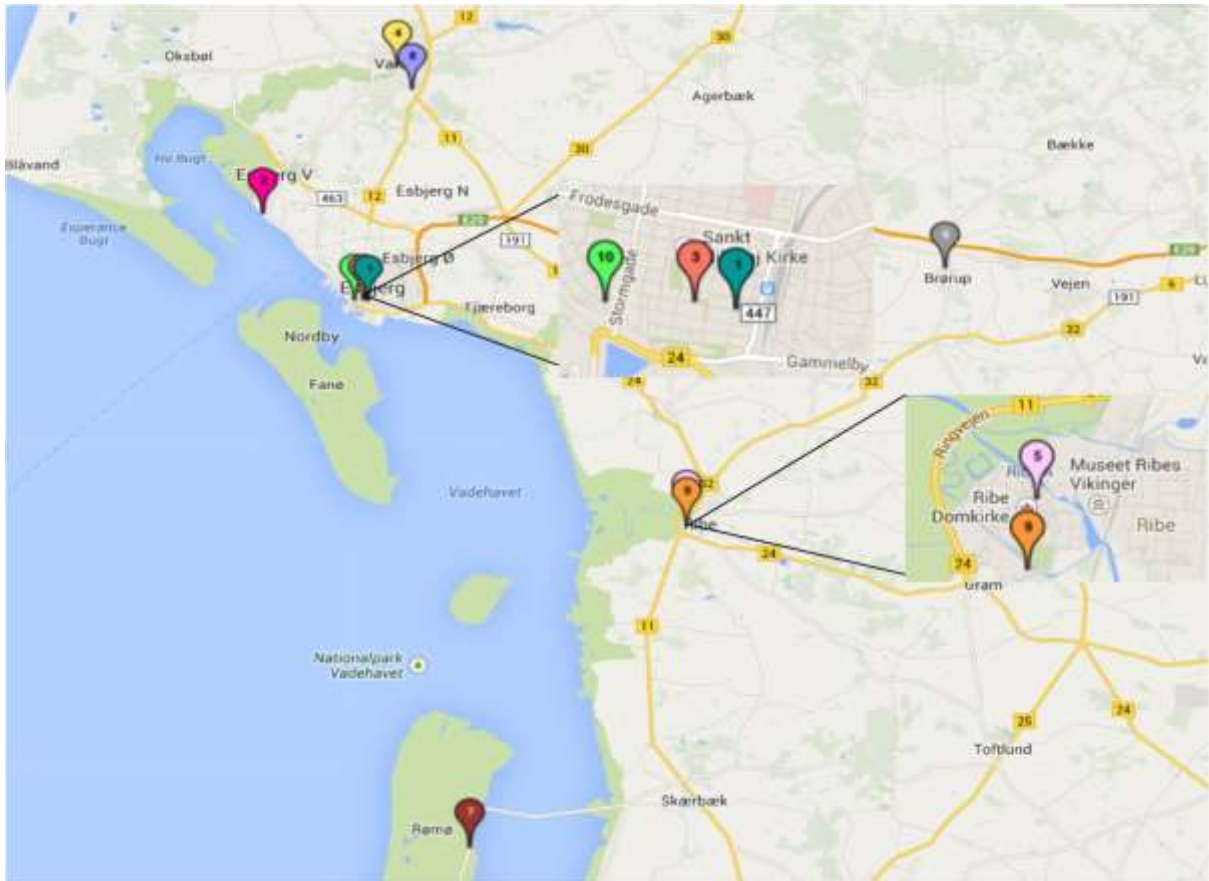
Table 2.5. Hotels in Esbjerg and surroundings

Esbjerg	Stars	Price*	Location	Rooms	Affiliation	Map
Hotel Ansgar	3	100+	City	51	C	3
Hjerting Badehotel	3	100+	Subs	42	C	2
Hotel Arnbjerg	3	100+	Subs	31	C	4
Cabinn Hotel Esbjerg	3	-100	City	149	C	1
Scandic Olympic	3	100+	City	147	C	10
Hotel Dagmar	3	100+	Subs	48	C	5
Hotel Sogarden Brorup	3	100+	Subs	19	I	6
Hotel Vadehavet	3	-100	Subs	33	I	7
Hotel Varde	3	-100	Subs	44	I	8
Ribe Byferie	4	100+	Subs	94	I	9

*lowest price for June 29-30, 2014 stay

*I – independent C – chain

Figure 2.1. Map showing location of Danish hotels in the study



Source: (Zeemaps, 2014)

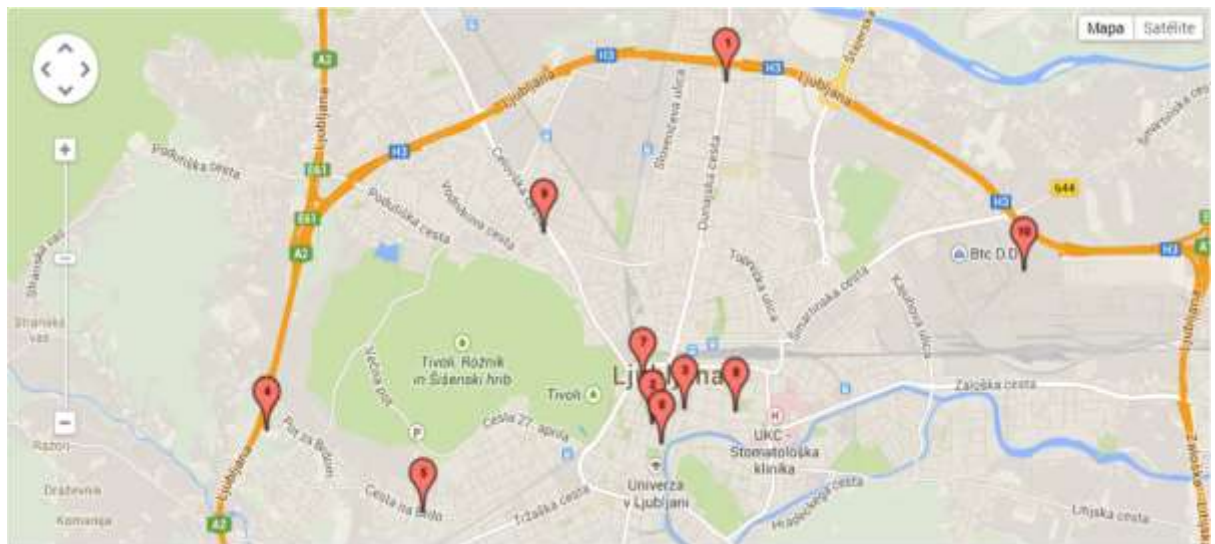
Table 2.6. Hotels in Ljubljana

Ljubljana	Stars	Price*	Location	Rooms	Affiliation	Map
Hotel Emonec	2	-100	City	41	I	6
M Hotel	3	100+	Subs	154	I	9
City Hotel	3	-100	City	202	I	3
Garni Hotel Azur	3	-100	Subs	15	I	5
Hotel Park	3	-100	City	155	I	8
Design Hotel Mons	4	-100	Subs	114	I	4
Austria Trend Hotel Ljubljana	4	-100	Subs	214	C	1
Best Western Premier Hotel Slon	4	100+	City	168	C	2
Plaza Hotel Ljubljana	4	100+	Subs	236	I	10
Hotel Lev	4	100+	City	173	I	7

*lowest price for June 29-30, 2014 stay

*I – independent C – chain

Figure 2.2. Map showing location of Slovene hotels in the study



Source: (Zeemaps, 2014)

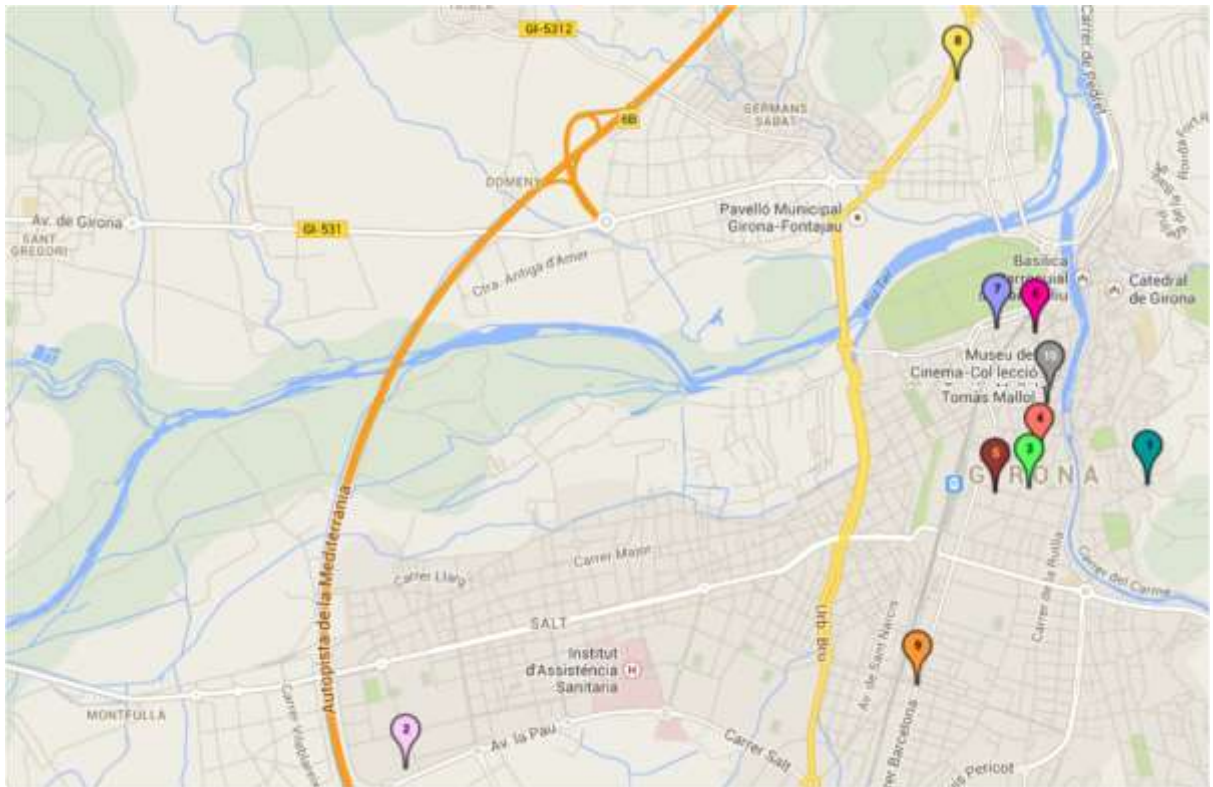
Table 2.7. Hotels in Girona

Girona	Stars	Price*	Location	Rooms	Affiliation	Map
Hotel Condal	1	-100	City	28	C	4
Hotel Europa	2	-100	City	25	I	5
Ibis Budget Girona	2	-100	Subs	92	C	8
Peninsular Hotel	3	-100	City	48	I	10
Holiday Inn Express	3	-100	Subs	93	C	2
Hotel Ultonia	3	-100	City	43	I	6
Melia Girona	4	-100	City	111	C	9
Hotel Carlemany	4	100+	City	89	I	3
AC Hotel Bellavista by Marriott	4	-100	Subs	74	C	1
Hotel URH Girona	4	100+	Subs	115	I	7

*lowest price for June 29-30, 2014 stay

*I – independent C – chain

Figure 2.3. Map showing location of Spanish hotels in the study



Source: (Zeemaps, 2014)

3 METHODOLOGY

This particular research topic was chosen as a result of the disparities which were theorized to exist between OTAs, concerning the provision of hotel information. The analysis of select textual content was just one component of the investigation, as the website functions which contribute to a fulfilling booking experience were also examined. This wholesome approach is supported by research which has confirmed that the context in which a service is offered has a greater bearing on customer attitudes than the product itself (Lu & Lin, 2002). The similarities, differences and patterns in the presentation of information within and among OTAs will be discussed, as well as the identification of the themes which are unique to the online hotel description genre. The intention was also to test the comprehensiveness and consistency of particular dimensions of hotel information among OTA's, in a bid to discover what pieces of information are being provided, as well as omitted.

Travel related information is arguably the most subscribed to and extensive area of content available online (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). In order to enhance the quality of vacation planning and reduce uncertainty (McIntosh & Goeldner, 1990), tourists conduct a search for travel related information toward selecting a suitable destination and may make reservations for accommodation, attractions, and transportation (Chen & Gursoy, 2000). Leisure tourists also tend to utilize multiple sources of information (Fodness & Murray, 1998). In order to evaluate OTAs as a source of travel information it is pertinent to design a methodology that is well suited to investigating the research questions posed in the introductory section. In order to do this one must first decide which methods of enquiry best meet the objectives of the study. Based on the nature of the questions, which requires secondary textual data to be studied to discern patterns, the research method is naturally an unobtrusive one.

3.1 The relationship among common terms

A methodology is said to be a framework which governs the carrying out of research while adhering to the principles of the prescribed paradigm. In this regard, a paradigm is a set of beliefs that compel a researcher to select certain research methods over another. On the other hand, a research method denotes the procedures, tools and techniques to obtain and analyze data. However, a research method is independent of methodologies and paradigms, and as such a research method, for example an interview, can accompany various research methodologies. In other words, "a method is a practical application of doing research whereas a methodology is the theoretical and ideological foundation of a method" (Sarantakos, 2005) cited in (Wahyuni, 2012).

3.2 Research paradigm

Research paradigms speak to the philosophical dimensions of social sciences. "A research paradigm is a set of elementary assumptions and beliefs which governs the researchers perception of the world he observes, which consequently serves as a mental framework that guides the researcher in his behavior" (Jonker & Pennink, 2010). The philosophical dimensions used to delineate research paradigms are ontology and epistemology (Laughlin, 1995). The former concerns the nature of knowledge, while the latter refers to the subsequent development of that knowledge. Ontology is "the view of how one perceives reality, with the subjectivist theory dictating that reality is a construct of social actors and supposes that individuals play a role in social phenomena. The second

dimension, epistemology, is “the beliefs on the way to generate, understand and use the knowledge that are deemed to be acceptable and valid” (Wahyuni, 2012).

3.2.1 The constructivist paradigm

This research is carried out within the framework of *constructivism* (also called the interpretive social sciences paradigm). Constructivists believe that reality is invented, constructed largely out of meanings and values of the observers. They hold that reality is out there and can be discovered by an objective observer, and that the observer cannot help but change what is observed. A fundamental assumption of the constructivist paradigm leads to the rejection of objectivity and suggests a stance of responsible participation instead. Its ontological perspective communicates the presence of multiple realities (relativism), and dictates that the world being studied is as ‘real’ as the researcher perceives it. Epistemologically, the viewpoint is one of subjectivity, deriving unique interpretations from literature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 35). One property of content analysis which fits well with the ethics of constructivist practice is its requirement to open space for multiple realities and perspectives (Allen, 1994).

3.3 Qualitative data analysis

Davenport and Prusak (1998) philosophically opined that “Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) as a form of knowledge management is a matter of managing analytical processes to transform data into information and information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom.” On a practical level, QDA necessitates the reading and understanding of textual material, so the differentiation of qualitative differences forms the basis of one’s analysis and subsequent interpretation (cited in Chenail, 2012b). Qualitative data is text based and cannot be effectively analyzed without researchers “organizing the words for comparison, contrast, and analysis to discover relationships, patterns, and principles within them” (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Richards & Richards, 1994). This means that the researcher serves as the primary instrument of analysis and so must function throughout the entire process as a tool to make sense of the data (Patton, 2001) cited in (Chenail, 2012a).

Weitzman offers a synopsis of the qualitative research process as follows: “Researchers typically commence with a handful of research questions with the goal to derive conclusions. Data is collected with the aim to elucidate the research questions, after which the data must be reduced so that patterns and relationships can be identified” (Weitzman, 1999). Four challenges that malign qualitative methods are the voluminous nature of the data; the complexities associated with the analysis; the detail required for the classification record; and, the adaptability and pace of the analysis (Richards & Richards, 1987). Miles and Huberman (1994) posited that qualitative methods consist of three kinds of data collection, one of which is written documents (Patton, 1990, p. 10). Data in this research originates on the web, more specifically from the hotel descriptions listed on OTAs. In the current study, *inductive* reasoning will be employed with “hypotheses, explanations, and theory generated from examination” of secondary data (Veal, 2011, p. 7). In summary, the objectives of qualitative analysis can be to draw conclusions, develop theories or test hypotheses (Wheeldon, 2010).

3.3.1 Computer assisted/aided qualitative data analysis software

Computer-supported QDA has been around for some time (Fielding & Lee, 1991), and software in this endeavor were introduced after 1980 (Seidel & Clark, 1984), with the emergence of programs such as ATLAS.ti and XSight designed for QDA (Dembkowski &

Hanmer-Lloyd, 1995; Gabor & Granger, 1993; Lacity & Janson, 1994). It should be highlighted that such programs are incapable of performing the analysis; rather it simplifies the process. Researchers are required to read the material, understand the ideas presented, and interpret the data based on prior knowledge (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Futing-Liao, 2004). The use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) programs can add new dimensions to analysis that are not possible with manual analysis (Bazeley, 2006, 2007; Kelle, 1996). These software can assist in recording, sorting, categorizing, storing, and coding qualitative data (Morse & Richards, 2002) to lighten the workload of the researcher (cited in Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Roberts and Wilson (2002) opined that the simplicity of software-assisted coding may result in the creation of an excessive number of coding categories and result in the loss of understanding and any meaningful interpretation. Coffey et al. (1996) and Lonkila (1995) suggest that researchers could mistake coding for analysis, and disregard the fact that the purpose of the process is interpretation. On the contrary, Lee and Fielding (1996) refute this argument, championing CAQDAS as pertinent to the execution of modernized and comprehensive strategies of analysis (cited in Rettie, Robinson, Radke, & Ye, 2008).

3.3.1.1 NVIVO

NVivo, otherwise known as Nudist Vivo, is software designed to undertake computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. As such, it permits the coding and retrieval of qualitative data, and allows the generation of memos which is a crucial grounded theory strategy. It is a variant of Nudist that is suited to the intricate analysis that is typical of qualitative research practitioners (Lewis-Beck et al.). This software will be utilized in the current study.

3.3.2 Content analysis

Content analysis is a popular method for “objective and systematic examination of communication content” (Berelson, 1952). Holsti (1969) described content analysis as “the application of scientific methods to documentary evidence.” Similarly, Weber (1983) defined it as “a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text.” Content analysis was further explained as the “study of textual data to find patterns and structures, highlight key components for further investigation, develop and condense categories in order to group similar concepts to extract meaning” (Gray & Densten, 1998; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Still, even qualitative content analysis includes quantitative measures (cited in Mehmetoglu & Dann, 2003). In essence, qualitative content analysis employs a coding method, which simply implies data labeling, or the assignment of a code which summarizes the focus of each data category (Wahyuni, 2012).

Krippendorff (1980) proposed two kinds of content analysis, one of which is qualitative analysis. Qualitative content analysis is similar to textual analysis, as both are interpretive in nature, and utilize statistics sparingly in the analysis of data. The author also praised the method for its unobtrusiveness; unstructured nature; context sensitivity and suitability for working with a large amount of data; as well as the fact that it focuses on the media (e.g. text) and not directly on the individual from whom it originates. Despite these benefits, content analysis like other methods has its limitations. Content analysis is often perceived as lacking in theoretical foundation since the emphasis is on the measurable characteristics of text rather than on what is theoretically significant (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Therefore,

the researcher must carefully consider if there is any theoretical interpretation that can be drawn from the recurrence of particular content (Holsti, 1969).

3.3.2.1 Content analysis in tourism

Content analysis in the field of tourism is considered less sophisticated than in other areas of research. Scholars have used content analysis to evaluate websites of various industries (Bell & Tang, 1998), and as such it was determined that this method is suitable for the ensuing study, and the methodology was consequently designed based on these similar studies. Murphy et al. (1996) used five search engines to search hotel websites in Florida and identified 32 website features from 36 hotel websites that facilitated online reservations. In a similar study, Countryman (1999) used the method to assess the websites of the official tourism organizations in 50 U.S. states. More recently, Baloglu and Pekcan (2006) analyzed 4 star and 5 star hotel websites in Turkey to assess design characteristics such as functionality, navigation, interactivity, and marketing practices (cited in Derong et al., 2009).

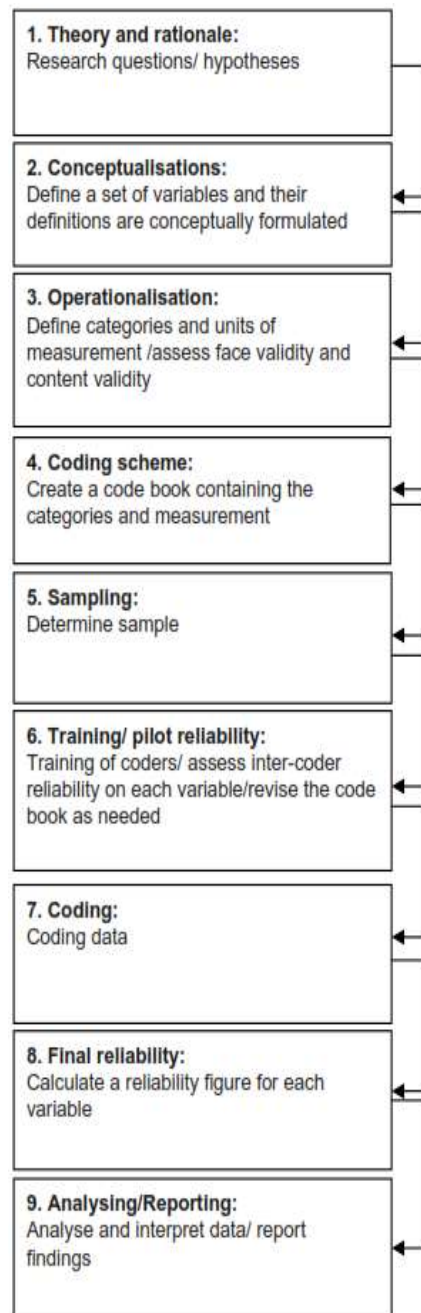
Content analysis has also been employed in destination image studies. Stepchenkova and Morrison (2006) examined both the narrative and visual online content of tour operator websites about Russia. They found that within the 212 websites analyzed, the US and Russian sites were portraying different images of Russia as a tourism destination (cited in Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007). Thongpapanl and Ashraf (2011) sought to identify the most effective website design features worthy of inclusion on retail websites by studying the relationship between information content and website personalization, and their impact on performance. They found that personalized information impacts customer satisfaction and purchase intention, which encourages repeat purchases.

3.3.2.2 The Content analysis procedure

Although the structure of the content analysis process used in a particular study is dependent on the research questions to be examined, the outline of the procedures necessary for deriving measures and inferences that are reliable and can be validated; are well established (Weare & Lin, 2000). A few authors have formulated processes for use in content analysis (Eto & Kyngäs, 2008; Harris, 2001; Neuendorf, 2002). Neuendorf (2002) illustrates the process of content analysis through a nine step flowchart (see Figure 3.1), while Harris (2001) provides a more practical demonstration of the content analysis procedure for a quantitative study in table format. Benassi, D'Angelo, and Geenen (2012) later adapted and modified the process authored by Harris (2001) for their qualitative study. These two diagrams were adapted by the current author (see Figure 3.2 on page 39).

Content analysis can be inductive or deductive, with the path chosen being dependent on the goals of the study. Deductive analysis requires that the coding categories be decided on before the process of analysis commences, while inductive analysis is based on emergent coding (Halpern & Regmi, 2013), which means that one of the purposes of the analysis is to derive the coding categories. If prior research about the phenomenon is scarce or the available information is sketchy, the inductive approach is best suited for the content analysis process (Lauri & Kyngas, 2005). The inductive process will be employed in this study.

Figure 3.1. A flowchart for content analysis research adapted from Neuendorf (2002)



A research paper should be able to be verified by other researchers, so that the results can be reviewed, and the experiment replicated; guaranteeing the validity. As such, a detailed description of the process used in this study will be given hereafter.

3.3.2.2.1 Stage 1. Formulating research questions or hypotheses

In this study, textual analysis will be conducted using NVivo, applying predominantly qualitative analysis (Jennings, 2010, p. 190). The main method of data analysis will be the summarizing, comparing and contrasting of the content of hotel descriptions from various OTAs. The steps defined by Neuendorf (2002) (see Figure 3.1) have been modified and adopted for this study, however, the descriptive table adapted from Harris (2001) and

Benassi et al. (2012) helps to put the procedure into perspective and can be seen in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2. Procedure for the content analysis of hotel descriptions on OTAs

Procedure for the content analysis of hotel descriptions on OTAs	
Content Analysis steps	Application in current study
1. Identify research questions and constructs	Comparison of the form, consistency and comprehensiveness of OTA hotel descriptions
2. Identify the source of information	Top OTAs from “The Top 15 Most Popular Travel Websites – April 2014” <i>The eBusiness Guide (2014)</i>
3. Data and time frame	150 OTA hotel profile pages during June 2014
4. Sample	30 hotels in Denmark, Slovenia, Spain 5 OTAs
5. Identify the context to be examined	Hotel descriptions
6. Specify the unit of analysis	Sentences and phrases
7. Determine the categories to be used	Hotel information and surrounding information
8. Generate the coding scheme	See Table 3.1
9. Conduct a pilot study	1 hotel from each country coded across all 5 OTAs
10. Collect the data	Data captured using NVivo’s Ncapture
11. Analyze content	Content analysis software NVivo used

Source: adapted from Harris (2001) and Benassi et al. (2012)

With the research questions or hypothesis already decided upon, the researcher proceeds to define the population from which a sample is selected (Weare & Lin, 2000). A method which involves interaction with the subjects of the research can alter their normal behavior, and thereby misrepresent the true nature of a phenomenon (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966). As such, a content analysis of OTAs focuses on factual information and therefore avoids this pitfall. It is hypothesized that there are differences in the way information is structured across OTA’s, as well as variations in the style of writing. With this in mind, the following research questions were drafted for investigation:

1. What are the website design functions used to enhance the OTA experience?
2. What are the characteristics of the content of hotel listing pages?
3. What are the common themes across the hotel description genre?
4. Are OTAs presenting consistent textual information?

3.3.2.2.2 Stage 2. Identifying variables

In formulating a process of data analysis, researchers often give consideration to the measurement of the variables, whether ordinal, nominal, or interval (or ratio) (GAO, 1992). When researchers utilize nominal variables, they often calculate category frequencies, but there are other possibilities (Reynolds, 1984). The variables examined in the sample are as follow:

- a) Country;
- b) OTA;
- c) Star rating;
- d) Property location; and,
- e) Affiliation.

3.3.2.2.3 Stage 3. Defining categories and units of measurement

“The purpose of creating categories is to provide a means of describing the phenomenon, to increase understanding and to generate knowledge” (Cavanagh, 1997). The importance of content category formulation is conveyed by the statement “content analysis stands or falls by its categories” (Berelson, 1952, p. 147). The development of a comprehensive and mutually exclusive categorization scheme to which each recording and context unit will be assigned is an important part of content analysis. Furthermore, these categories must suitably correspond to the relevant constructs set out in the research questions and must be consistently interpreted by those coding the content (Weare & Lin, 2000). When creating categories in the inductive analysis process, the researcher arrives at a decision as to which units belong to the same category through interpretation (Dey, 1993), and which categories can be consolidated in the subsequent step (cited in Eto & Kyngäs, 2008). One advantage of studying hotel descriptions is that they are usually straightforward in their message with no need to consider the deep (semantic) structures which characterize discourse (Franzosi, 1989).

Krippendorff (1980) suggests three units of measurement: the sampling unit, the recording unit, and the context unit. OTA websites contain many pages: the home page features the search function for various service offerings (flights, car rentals etc.); the results page displays a summarized list of hotels on offer; and, the hotel profile page provides details about a specific accommodation provider. In order to conduct a detailed analysis, two areas of focus were chosen, with the hotel profile pages (sampling unit) being the focal point. Firstly, the interface features were itemized, and then a content analysis of the hotel description carried out. A challenge arose as some OTAs include a list of hotel amenities beneath the hotel descriptions (context unit) with items that may have not been mentioned in the description. It was decided that the analysis would only focus on paragraphed items, in order to ensure that all OTAs are considered equally. Similarly, only the features on the hotel profile pages were taken into account when constructing a list of interface attributes. On a more detailed level, each paragraph was assessed to code particular words or phrases. The unit of analysis (recording unit) was a sentence, phrase or word, as the writing style used by the OTAs is very concise and tends to confine ideas to a sentence or smaller unit.

3.3.2.2.4 Stage 4. Creating coding scheme

Sandelowski (1993) posited that the careful selection of citations is an endeavor which ensures the authenticity of the resulting data and serves to increase the validity of the research, and indicates to readers from whence the original data categories were adapted. In this light, prior to conducting the inductive analysis the review of relevant literature gave an indication of what the categories may be. Rong et al. (2009) came up with five variables in order to identify respondents’ perceptions of the relative importance of different types of hotel website information. The general dimensions include: Facilities Information, Reservation Information, Contact Information, Surrounding Area Information, and Website Management. From these, Hotel Facilities Information, which is a general description of the hotel property and information on the facilities and amenities available to guests, and Surrounding Area Information which details information related to the nearby amenities, were found relevant to the current study. The content was also analyzed for two advertising techniques, namely persuasion and emotive description. A fundamental issue for the researcher is the choice or development of an analytical framework. The coding scheme includes the categories which are to be used for coding

(Harris, 2001). A code list was created containing the categories and attributes for the hotel listing page contents (see Table 3.1):

Table 3.1. Content Analysis Coding Scheme

Content Analysis Coding Scheme		
Themes	Categories	Attributes
Affiliation	OTA	Booking Expedia Priceline Hotels Travelocity
	Country	Denmark Slovenia Spain
	Hotel	One of 30 hotels
Form	Location on Page	First quarter Second quarter Third quarter Fourth quarter
	Page Alignment	Left Right Centered
	Format	Single paragraph with heading Single paragraph without heading Multiple paragraphs single heading Multiple paragraphs multiple headings Multiple paragraphs without heading
	Paragraphs	One Two Three Four Five Six
	Fonts used	One Two More than two
	Font sizes	One Two More than two
	Text style	Plain Plain and bold
	Text colors (one or more)	Black, White, Gray, Pink, Red, Brown, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Violet

Table 3.1. Content Analysis Coding Scheme (cont'd)

Content Analysis Coding Scheme		
Themes	Categories	Attributes
	Number of colors	One Two More than two
	Word count	Numerical value
Hotel Information	Hotel Size	Less than 50, less than 100, more than 100
	Star Rating	1, 2, 3, 4
	Hotel Facilities	Food and Beverage Facilities Business Facilities Leisure Facilities Room Amenities Bathroom amenities Special Information
Locale Information	Nearby Offerings	Attractions, Activities, Amenities
	Transportation	Air, Train, Bus, Taxi, Shuttle
Advertising techniques	Persuasion	Present Absent
	Emotive Description	Present Absent

3.3.2.2.5 Stage 5. Sampling

According to Pratt (2009), the authenticity of research is evaluated based on its methodology of sampling and analytical method. Secondary sources are sources of data that have been collected by parties other than the researcher, and not particularly for the research question to which it is applied (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). This raises the issue of the continuous change of the websites' content which often leads to potential problems, with research reporting data collection times between two days and five months. Even though the relevance of the data was not a primary concern in this study, the collection of data from the 150 sources was conducted over a period of 2 days with the aid of Nvivo's Ncapture, which saves web pages to the software in pdf format.

Prior to gathering the sample, efforts were made to identify the most widely used online travel agencies which operate international websites. After a quick search for the keywords "top online travel agencies" using the popular and largest engine Google (Salinas, 2006), a comprehensive list was identified from a reputable website. *The eBusiness Guide (2014)* published an article titled, "The Top 15 Most Popular Travel Websites – April 2014" ranked by "estimated unique monthly visitors." Relevance sampling was used to identify the OTAs, because not all the sites listed were online travel agencies. The list included the web 2.0 site Trip Advisor, and the blog Fodor's Travel,

among others. Hence, five agencies which met the following inclusion criteria were identified:

- a. Sells hotel rooms in a non-specific geographic area;
- b. Does not link to other agencies or hotels for booking; and
- c. Operates an English version.

The intent was to analyze descriptions from more OTAs, but parallel to the results of the Guillet and Law (2010) study conducted in Hong Kong. It revealed that very few hotels are present on all third party sites, with only 8% of the hotels analyzed having a presence on all the distribution channels, while 22% of the hotels use one distribution channel (Guillet & Law, 2010).

In contrast to quantitative data, qualitative data does not have a predetermined “significance level.” As such, there is no formula for deciding on the number of interviews or observations that should be conducted toward a qualitative analysis. What is sufficient is dependent on the questions that the researcher wants to answer (Pratt, 2009). The second round of sampling involved the designation of three countries which would be representative of Europe on a whole. Denmark was identified from the Scandinavian region, Slovenia from Central Europe and Spain from the Mediterranean region. From each country, the researcher identified a familiar city in order to conduct a proper geographic sampling of hotels. These cities were Esbjerg, Denmark; Ljubljana, Slovenia and Girona, Spain. Therefore 10 hotels were selected from each city, a total of 30, accounting for a sample that is representative of the hotel population. In this regard, star rated hotels were chosen, of chain/group and independent affiliation. The data collection focused on hotels versus other forms of accommodation such as hostels or bed and breakfasts, as the chance is higher that they are featured on all five OTAs.

The analysis focused on hotels in Europe for a few reasons. The primary reason is that the researcher is familiar with the region as well as with the hotel booking sites frequently utilized. Furthermore, Europe has a wide portfolio of hotels in terms of room count, star rating, price range, and operation/management status. It also has a diverse range of countries to allow for contrasting of the information. Similarly, even though the official language of the countries chosen is not English, the information was likely to be available in English. Likewise, European hotels are likely to employ far reaching marketing and sales efforts, with hoteliers ensuring a presence on the five largest online travel agencies. The hotels featured were 13% 1 and 2 star, 57% 3 star and 30% 4 star. There were no 5 star hotels in the cities chosen. This breakdown accurately represents the distribution of starred hotels across all three cities, with 3 star hotels being the most popular (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2. Breakdown of hotel attributes

Attribute	Breakdown by number of hotels		
	1 star & 2 star	3 star	4 star
Star rating	4	17	9
Room Total	-50	-150	150+
	12	11	7
Guest Rating	2-3	3.5	4+
	4	9	16
	6.5-7.4	7.5-8.4	8.5+
	5	16	9
Affiliation	Chain	Independent	
	13	17	

Source: (Booking.com, 2014a)

3.3.2.2.6 Stage 6. Training coders/pilot reliability

The reliability of a research method “rests on the assurance that data is obtained independent of the measuring event, instrument or person. Reliable data can be defined as data that remains constant throughout variations in the measuring process” (Kaplan & Goldsen, 1965, p. 83) cited in (Harris, 2001). Notwithstanding, Babbie (1975, p. 234) and others commented that content analysis is an extraordinarily safe methodology. If it has been determined that some pertinent information was not considered or was not coded properly, it is easy to return to the data source and make additions to the original data collected; which is not usually possible with other methods such as observation. In the current study, an initial coding chart was created to test the comprehensiveness of the coding categories, and was used to code a handful of randomly selected hotels from the sample countries, across all the OTAs. In doing so, some categories were refined, as well as new ones created. Because there is one coder, inter-coder reliability is not applicable and so there was no need to reconcile for coding differences.

3.3.2.2.7 Stage 7. Coding

“Coding is the most labor intensive and least intellectually stimulating aspect of content analysis” (Weare & Lin, 2000). Content analysis enables the measurement of the characteristics of textual media, both *manifest*, that is, those elements that are physically present and countable, for example word frequencies, and *latent*, that is an interpretation of the symbolism underlying the physical data (Berg, 2008; Woodrum, 1984). This study will focus on the manifest characteristics of the text. A limitation of fully automated coding is that it restricts content analysis to the manifest characteristics of texts such as the relationship between terms (Woodrum, 1984). In this light, Markoff, Shapiro, and Weitman (1975, p. 33) recommend that human coders are necessary for meaningful interpretation of content, and Wood (1980) suggests a balance between computer-aided and human coding, which will be utilized in this study with the aid of content analysis software NVivo.

3.3.2.2.8 Stage 9. Data analysis

Researchers are often misled into believing that content analysis is a simple method; only to come upon unforeseen challenges during the process of analysis (Glaser, 1978). This

can be explained by the fact that content analysis is not a linear process and is argued to be more complex and difficult than quantitative analysis “because it is less standardized and formulaic” (Polit & Beck, 2004). “There are no simple guidelines for data analysis: each inquiry is distinctive, and the results depend on the skills, insights, analytic abilities and style of the investigator” (Hoskins & Mariano, 2004). Microsoft Excel was used in tandem with NVivo, to visualize the data. Additionally, there were instances in which the researcher had to conduct manual counts. Notwithstanding, the researcher endeavored to analyze the various aspect of the hotel listing page, while maintaining cohesion of ideas.

3.4 Limitations

The primary limitation of the content analysis is that the hotel description was the only textual content analyzed; however, hotel information is also present under headings such as hotel facilities, hotel amenities and hotel policies. Similarly, the catalogue of website elements was only done for the hotel listing page, although OTAs consist of home pages, hotel results pages, as well as other pages. As such, any inference into the creativity or innovations of an OTA is based on a single facet of their websites. In a similar manner, the researcher used personal judgment to assign the elements to categorize, and for this, the placements could be challenged by another scholar. In terms of the content analysis, unlike latent (inferred) analyses done to interpret the sentiments of travelers from Web 2.0 content such as travel forums and travel blogs, the current study analyzes manifest (obvious) content, as hotel description are informative and usually void of underlying meanings. This means that the study cannot claim to offer psychoanalysis of the parties who wrote the description, but rather a simple categorization of the information.

The accuracy of generalization made by the study’s results could be affected by the fact that the hotel star grouping was disproportionate, being dominated by 3 star hotels. This was unavoidable, as the hotel market in the destinations studied were home to very few 1 and 2 star hotels that were listed on all five OTAs. Similarly, the study presents the top amenities in each category based on their popularity in the descriptions; however, this is not an indication of their popularity with travelers, but what hoteliers/OTAs believe travelers find important. In regard to information provision by OTAs, the observations recorded may not be applicable to all existing agencies, as the sample consisted of the five largest and possibly most dynamic agencies.

Lastly, from the onset, the study was intended to be a general assessment of the hotel listing page, and as such did not go into detail regarding all the dimensions examined, for example website color scheme. In this light, it can be expected that the facets which comprised each dimension were not completely investigated, as the researcher is operating from a tourism perspective and not from that of a web designer or linguist. Likewise, based on the method used, the study is a subjective one, and as such, the researcher cannot claim to have made any irrefutable observations.

4 RESULTS

This section of the paper seeks to operationalize the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the research in progress. The results of a content analysis are usually the described contents of the categories, or in other words the meanings understood from the these categories (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Rather than present data in its pure form, researchers usually present just their interpretations of the data. Golden-Biddle and Locke (2007) believe that this scenario is awkward as there is “no clear chain of evidence to

show how the researchers garnered interpretations from their data” (Pratt, 2009). Krippendorff (1980, p. 40) opined that standard category schemes worthy of visual display includes characteristics such as message length, frequency counts of themes in a message, as well as an analysis of the most emphasized themes (cited in Weare & Lin, 2000). With these recommendations in mind, the researcher exploits the power of visual data representation in the forms of tables and graphs to emphasize and interpret the data. The results are organized by research questions and end with a summary of the main findings.

4.1 What are the website elements/functions used to enhance the OTA experience?

This section first section of the results will show: a) the types of website features OTAs are utilizing; b) the dimensions they belong to; c) what elements are being used to personalize and add value to the online booking experience; and, d) the tactics used to persuade browsers into making a purchase.

4.1.1 Dimensions of website functions

A modified version of two existing website dimension schemes (i.e. Chung & Law, 2003; Vrana, Zafiropoulos, & Paschaloudis, 2004) has been used to categorize the attributes of the OTA websites featured in the study. As such, the dimensions adopted from previous studies are:

- a. facilities information;
- b. contact information;
- c. reservation/prices information;
- d. surrounding area information;
- e. management of the website; and,
- f. company profile.

In addition to these dimensions, for the purposes of this specific study, the author of this paper adds:

- a. personalization; and,
- b. value enhancement.

It must be noted that the elements of these new dimensions correspond to the pre-existing ones, however, in pursuit of providing answers to the questions posed in the introduction, value added and personalized elements must be highlighted “to catalogue the interface features that OTAs use to add value to the online hotel booking experience.” Since facilities information and surrounding area information fall within the purview of research question 2 regarding common hotel description themes they will be discussed later on. The elements which correspond to the “contact information,” “management of the website” and “company profile” dimensions have been categorized (see Appendix A and Appendix B) but will not be elaborated on in this study as they are not pertinent to the discussion at hand. Therefore the website elements which belong to the dimensions: reservation/prices information, personalization and value enhancement will be discussed hereafter.

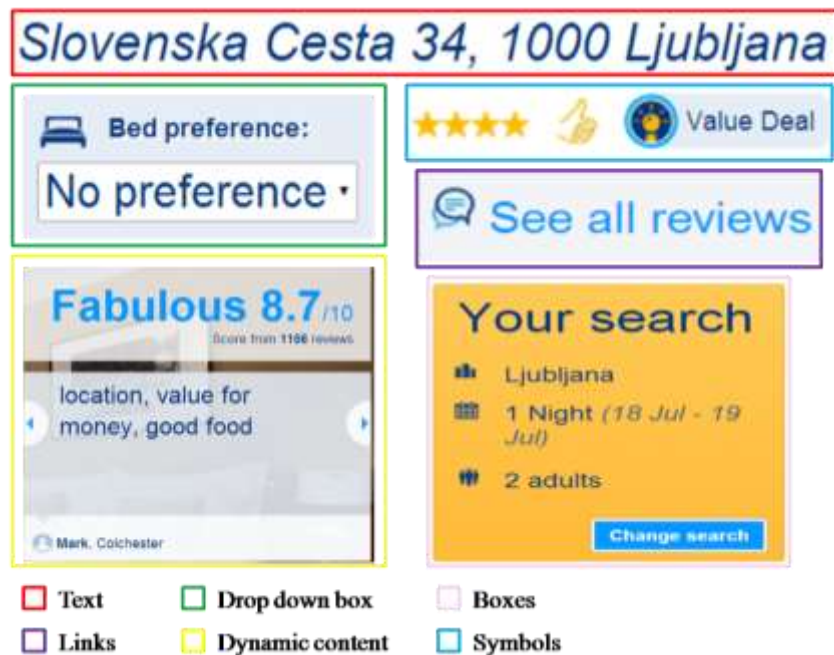
The hotel listing pages were examined in order to identify the various elements that construct the web page. A total of 70 website elements were identified; 27 present on all five OTAs, five elements present on four OTAs, 14 present on three OTAs, eight on only two OTAs and 16 items that were unique to particular OTAs (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Booking.com had the most elements (see Figure 4.3), as well as the highest

number of unique elements, many of which fell under the value enhancement dimension. Priceline.com's page was somewhat basic with links to key features provided, instead of placing the feature on the hotel listing page itself.

4.1.2 Website functions/elements on the hotel listing page

Many of the elements which were categorized into the eight dimensions listed above, also correspond to general website feature categories such as links, text and drop down menus which serve to organize content (see them highlighted by color in Figure 4.1). This means that a feature such as a "snapshot of guest reviews" which is categorized under the value enhancement dimension also corresponds to the "dynamic content grouping" while text that says "See Ljubljana travel guide" would be classified as a "link." Similarly, in order to enable users to effectively find their way around web pages, a number of navigational features are utilized by OTAs (see Figure 4.2). The presence of "boxes" have been observed on the hotel listing page of each OTA, enabling browsers to easily "change search" or return to various points in the results hierarchy. Booking.com places a "back to top" button at four strategic locations on the hotel listing page(usually after subsections such as "room pricing and availability" and "hotel policies") to enable users to return to the pertinent features located within the first frame of the web page, such as "guest review score." These features weigh heavily on the user-friendliness of a site.

Figure 4.1. A sample of the types of website features used by OTAs



(Source: Booking.com)

Figure 4.2. Website navigational features: The “change search” box, hierarchy of search results, “back to top” button, and feedback link

[Back to Hotel Results](#)

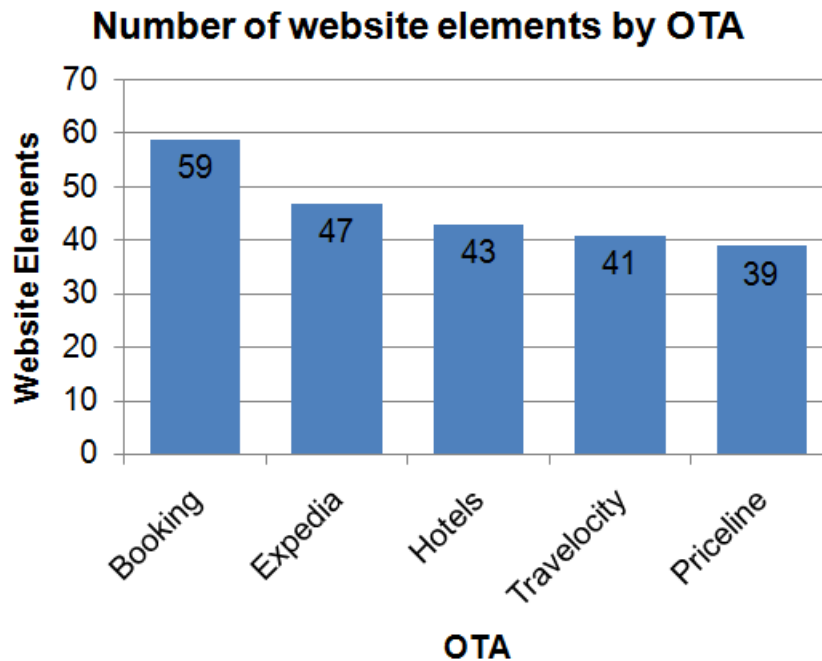
[New Search](#)

[home](#) → [slovenia](#) → [osrednjeslovenska](#) → [ljubljana](#) → [best western premier hotel slon](#)
1,088 properties 176 properties 139 properties

Best Western Premier Hotel Slon accepts these cards and reserves the right to pre-authorise your card prior to arrival.

[▲ Back to top](#)

Figure 4.3. Column chart showing the number of website elements per OTA



4.1.2.1 Personalization

The OTAs feature numerous website elements in an attempt to connect with existing and potential customers. The most basic attempts at personalization identified was the freedom afforded to users to change their language and currency; as the global reach of OTAs mean that customers could be viewing hotel listings from anywhere in the world, as well as outside of their customary location (see Figure 4.4). To appeal to the customers on a personal level OTAs have implemented loyalty schemes that offer reward for accumulating points (the more often you book and the higher you spend; the more points you earn) in a bid to encourage repeat business. They also use catch phrases that give customers the feeling of one to one interaction, for example “Other travelers liked these hotels, we think you will too” (see Figure 4.5). It was observed that the OTAs offered

hotel suggestions based on destination, in a bid to keep customers browsing their page, especially if they had their intentions set on booking a particular hotel.

In an attempt to assist users who may experience difficulties using the online platform, some OTAs offer toll free calls to booking and customer service centers. Booking.com even displays the “top 5 hotels” that have been viewed by the customer in a particular destination, as a result of storing and applying algorithms to browsing data, whether or not the customer has signed into the site. Nevertheless, the best way to make use of the personalization features is to sign up for an account with the OTA which enables the customer to maintain customized hotel lists, among other benefits. Headway has also been made regarding social media marketing, and as a result, links to social media sites were shown on the hotel listing page of some OTAs (see Figure 4.6), but with certainty we can assume that they all maintain social media pages. Hotels.com even offered browsers the facility to share the hotel listing via nine additional social networking sites. It has become customary for customers to ask and receive answers in real time via social media instead of waiting for an email or holding the line to reach a customer service agent. Many OTAs also provide mobile applications available for download free of charge for browsers on the go, and this can be helpful in the case of a last minute booking where the “walk-in” rate may be higher than the intermediary’s rates. Personalized website elements have different aims which range from retaining customer preferences, to giving a feeling of individualized service, to providing helpful suggestions, as well as avenues of help.

Figure 4.4. Five elements of basic website personalization

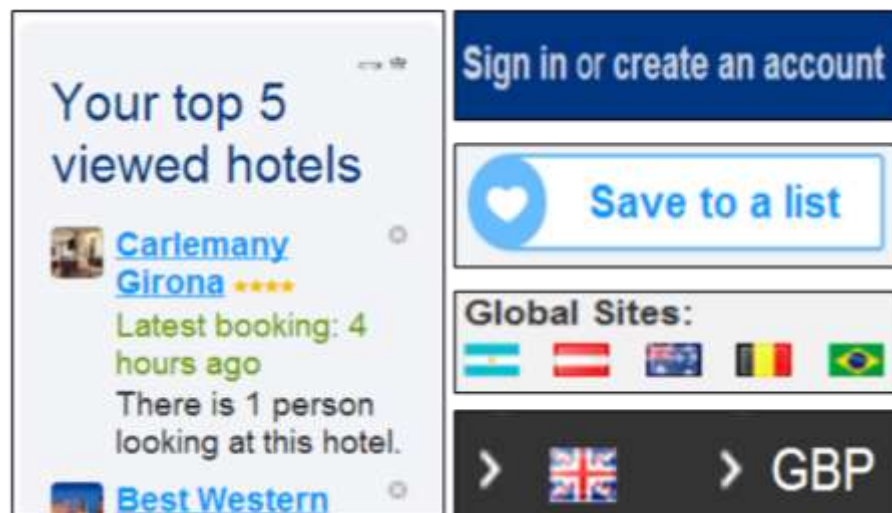


Figure 4.5. Website elements which give the impression of individualized content

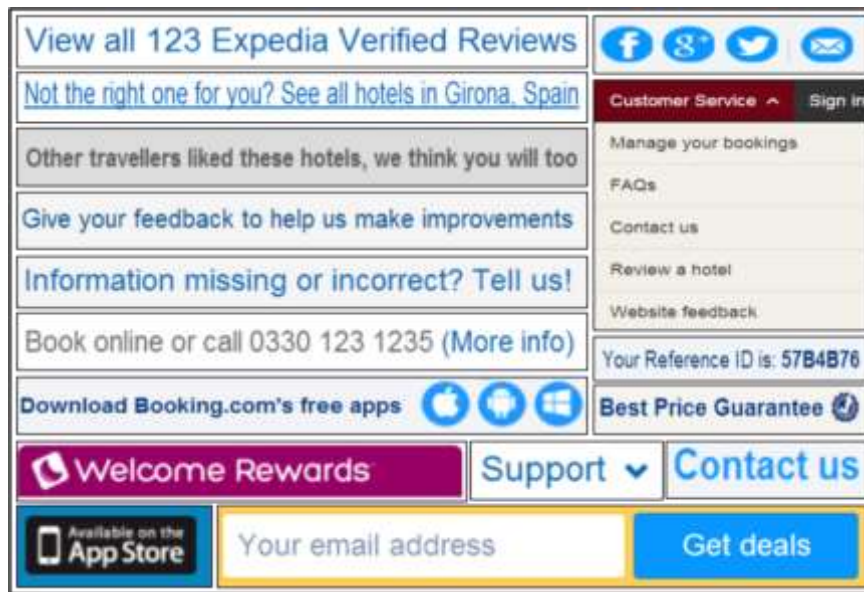










Figure 4.6. Social media links by OTA

	Facebook	Twitter	Google+
Booking.com			
Expedia.com	—	—	—
Hotels.com			
Priceline.com			—
Travelocity.com	—	—	—

4.1.2.2 Value enhancement

The value enhancement website dimension had three times as many elements as the others (see Appendix A and Appendix B for a complete list). Value added features include a snapshot of the hotel location as well as a link to a larger, more detailed and interactive map of surrounding areas that denotes attractions, restaurants and bus stops. OTAs have implemented algorithms to provide dynamic content to ensure that browsers are aware of the number of rooms booked at a particular hotel in the last 24 hours (see Figure 4.9), and what guests have said about a particular hotel by providing real-time snapshots of reviews that can later be sorted by party composition or language (see Figure 4.8). Regarding the use of sales techniques the OTAs have employed quite a few, however, there is no unique tactic utilized by a particular OTA. In addition to hotel related offerings, OTAs also offer customers the offer to email the listing to a friend. Aside from the tactics mentioned, OTAs may utilize stamps such as “Value Deal” or “Preferred Property” to convince users that the property being viewed is perfect for booking. Features which personalized the OTA experience were also value enhancing (see Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7. Website elements which provide suggestions and highlights

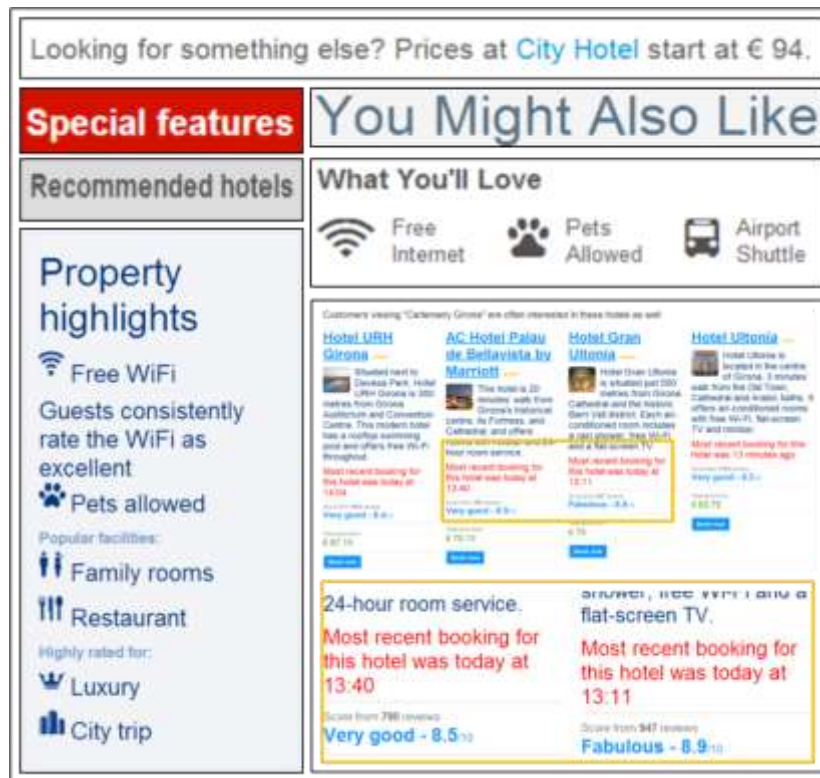


Figure 4.8. Dynamic website elements used to enhance the booking experience



4.1.2.3 Reservation/prices information

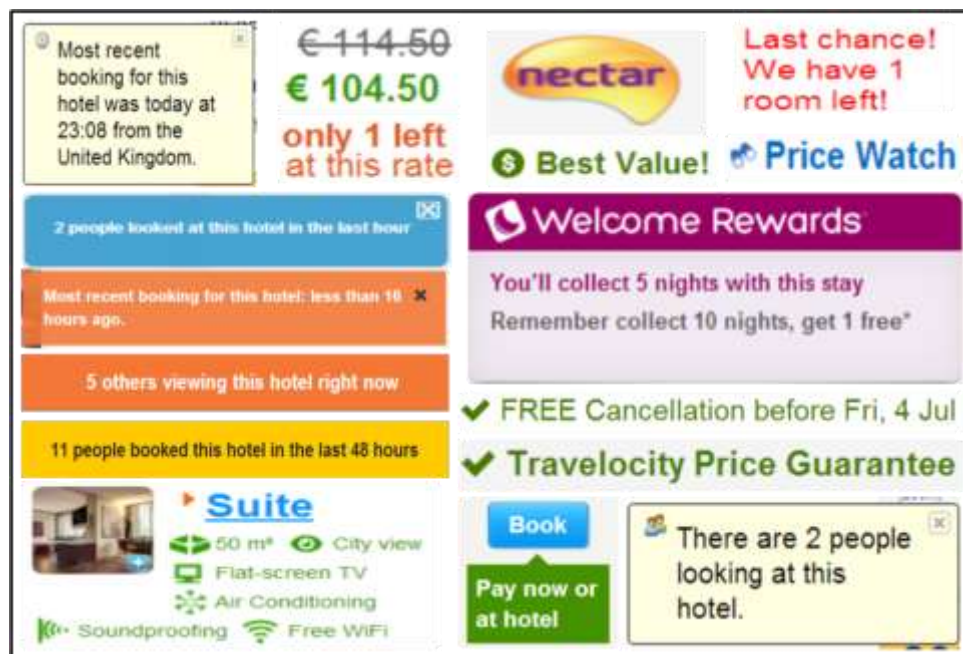
Expedia.com and Travelocity.com featured the reservation function after the hotel slideshow, unlike the others which placed the hotel description below the slideshow; giving a sense of importance to this dimension. Priceline.com did not display room availability information in the listing, but instead displayed a "Choose Room" link. Nevertheless, Priceline.com offers a "price change notification" feature which sends an email to the customer if the price of the hotel has changed; Hotels.com also has this option. The advertised "best price guarantee" which promises to match a better deal elsewhere, the "free cancellation" declaration and the "discounted price" tag, are tactics utilized to urge consumers to book before finalizing their travel plans or even without

searching for a superior deal on competing sites (see Figure 4.9). Expedia and Travelocity also provide the user-friendly option which allows the browser to sort available rooms by maximum occupancy.

An investigation shows that regarding the “Room, type, price and availability” feature, all the OTAs offer or display the majority of the following functions: a) bed type; b) change search info box; c) detailed amenities; d) discounts; e) free cancellation notice; f) limited availability notice; g) loyalty rewards; h) no. of guests; i) no. of rooms; j) non-refundable notice; k) optional breakfast; l) price guarantee; m) room price; n) room type; o) select amenities; p) sort criteria; and q) taxes/fees.

What is clear is that OTAs have employed every possible technique to ensure that once their website is visited, browsers will be encouraged to book as soon as possible, whether because of loyalty rewards, free cancellation, the limited availability of the room, the alleged discount, or simply because other browsers are viewing the hotel at the same time, or others have already booked within the last hour/24 hours. Hotels.com, Priceline.com and Expedia.com even offer the option to “pay now or at the hotel” and Booking.com boasts “no booking or credit card fees”; the tricks are endless (see Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.9. Strategies used to entice browsers into booking



4.2 What are the characteristics of the hotel listing page?

In this section the various characteristics of the hotel listing pages will be discussed. The results commence with a summary of the basic factors required for the functioning of an OTA website. Thereafter, page layout, the use of pictures, color, font, paragraphing and word count will be examined. The techniques such as persuasion which lend an advertising feel to the descriptions will be discussed in the latter part. Lastly, in a bid to discern patterns in the formulation of descriptions within each OTA, the hotel descriptions will be dissected and described.

4.2.1 The universal features of the hotel listing page

The OTA hotel listing pages typically have 10-12 frames, with Priceline.com having only three frames (see Appendix C and Appendix D). Frames are simply the number of times the “page down” button on the keyboard needs to be clicked in order to reach the bottom of the page (when the resolution is zoomed to 100%). Benckendorff (2006) defines “basic factors” as those that “represent a basic level of acceptable service.” The author goes on to state that, “basic look and book features and advanced booking features are critical factors because consumers attach a high level of importance to these attributes.” All OTAs display the following basic informational features on the hotel listing page (see their layout color-coded in Appendix C page and Appendix D):

- a. Hotel name, address and star rating;
- b. Search box;
- c. Picture slideshow;
- d. Hotel description;
- e. Map of hotel location;
- f. Room prices, types and availability;
- g. Guest reviews;
- h. Hotel facilities;
- i. Hotel policies; and,
- j. Suggested hotels.

The placement of the picture slideshow within the first frame of the web page along with information such as hotel name, address and star rating was found to be the only similarity in page arrangement among OTAs. Priceline does not present the “Room prices, types and availability” feature nor the “Location map” feature on the hotel listing page, however, the price is stated and a link provided to the other features. Nevertheless, one wonders if the absence of these features on the hotel listing page decreases its user-friendliness by forcing browsers to navigate away from the main page. “Hotel facilities” and “Hotel policies” are usually featured within close proximity of each other. It was discovered that Expedia and Travelocity have identical page arrangements even though they do not belong to the same parent company. On the other hand, Booking.com and Priceline.com belong to the same parent company; however, their web page arrangements do not show any signs of this connection.

4.2.2 The characteristics of the hotel listing page content

Upon examination of the five OTAs, it is evident that they subscribe to an unwritten code of design as they utilize similar fonts, font colors and web page arrangement; refraining from differentiating themselves in this regard. Of the five OTAs, four have chosen to utilize a predominantly blue color scheme (see Figure 4.10), with the majority using a dark gray Arial font. All the OTAs have consistently used a single font throughout the hotel listing page. In Figure 4.10, it is seen that grays and blues are very popular and are utilized to write the majority of texts with greens, yellows and reds used sparingly in order to highlight important content (see Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.10. Hotel listing web page color schemes and hotel description text colors

OTA	Hotel Listing Web page Color Schemes (by color popularity)							Description Text Colors
Booking								
Expedia								 
Hotels								
Priceline								
Travelocity								 

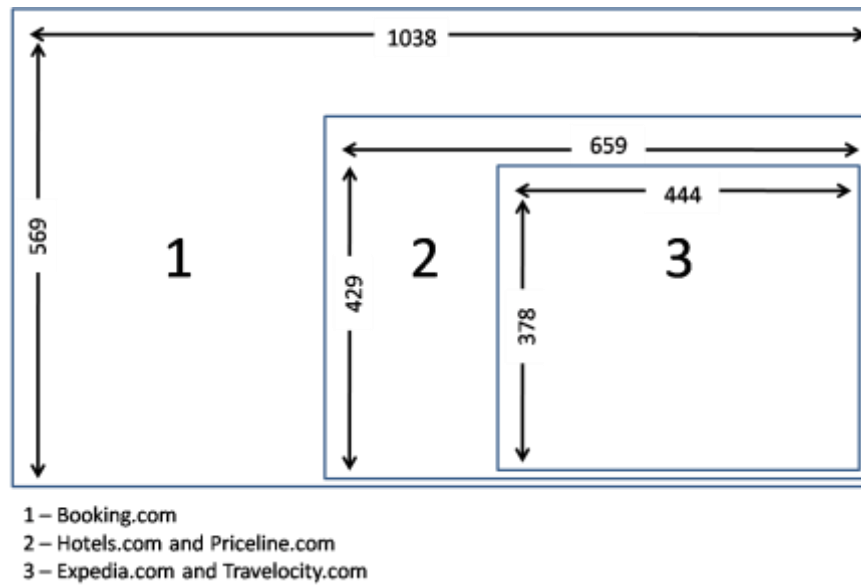
Figure 4.11. Instances of color used to emphasize content



4.2.2.1 Slideshow pictures

Although the hotel slideshow was consistently presented within the first frame of the page, overall page arrangement differed (see Appendix C and Appendix D). The size of the main picture at 100 percent zoom was quite visible for all the OTAs; nevertheless, Expedia.com and Travelocity.com had issues relating to picture framing and quality. The average is 20 to 30 pictures per listing, with an incredible 113 pictures on Priceline's listing for Hotel Carlemany in Girona, Spain. Hotels.com allows up to 50 pictures per listing. Booking.com has the largest slideshow picture (box 1), followed by Hotels.com and Priceline (box 2) with a tie, and the same for Travelocity and Expedia (box 3) (see Figure 4.12). The dimensions of the main picture range from 444 to 1038 pixels in width to 378 and 569 pixels in height. Pixel is an abbreviation of "picture element" which represents the smallest constituent element in a digital image and is smaller in size than a full stop (Solomon & Brekcon, 2011). The number of pictures shown for each hotel varies by OTA, with some using the same pictures; however, no pattern could be discerned here. The sole correlation observed is the tendency of 4 star hotels to have more pictures.

Figure 4.12. Pixel dimensions of the main slideshow pictures across OTAs



4.2.2.2 The formatting of OTA hotel descriptions

The page alignment of the hotel description varied from left to right margin aligned, and did not enjoy the same level of attention across OTA, with placement ranging from the first to the fourth frame of the hotel listing page. Notwithstanding, it was always positioned in the upper part of the page; within the first and second quarters (if the hotel listing page is divided into four equal horizontal sections). In Figure 4.13, excerpts for the hotel description of the Best Western Premier Hotel Slon in Ljubljana have been used to illustrate the various text/background combinations used. It may appear as though Expedia.com, Hotels.com and Priceline.com use the same shade of gray in their description, but they are indeed different; highlighting the high level of attention that is paid to the subject of color (see Figure 4.13). Hotels.com uses a beige background while Expedia.com and Travelocity use gray backgrounds, with the others using white. Nevertheless, these colors are high contrast in relation to the text color and therefore signal the efforts of the OTAs to ensure readability and retention in prospective clients.

The OTAs which separated information associated with content such as “location, hotel features and guestrooms” (Hotels.com) into paragraphs were operating in line with the results of scholarly studies (i.e. (Goldman et al., 1995)). Three of the five OTAs utilized both plain and bold texts in an attempt to emphasize particular areas of content such as headings; even using headings of varying sizes to draw attention to a hotel’s unique selling point (see Figure 4.13). It is also observed that 2 of the OTAs further emphasized the headings by placing them in a different color. The majority of OTAs utilized between three and five paragraphs, but Priceline.com goes against the grain by utilizing a block of text in the majority of their descriptions, rather than paragraphs. Some OTAs are consistent in their formatting, while others display variations. The typical Booking.com description contains four paragraphs (see Figure 4.14); however, a few instances of five and six paragraphs have been observed, particularly for 4 star hotels. Interestingly, Expedia.com and Travelocity.com have utilized very similar color schemes, probably as a result of their recent partnership (Jones, 2013).

The word count within and among OTAs differed greatly, with Expedia.com being the most consistent; 86% of its description having between 70 and 90 words. Travelocity had

the highest average word count (see Figure 4.15), with the highest overall word count recorded for a 4 star hotel at 260 words. Properties rated 4 stars had the highest average at 159 words, 3 stars calculated at 124 words, and 1-2 stars at 108 words.

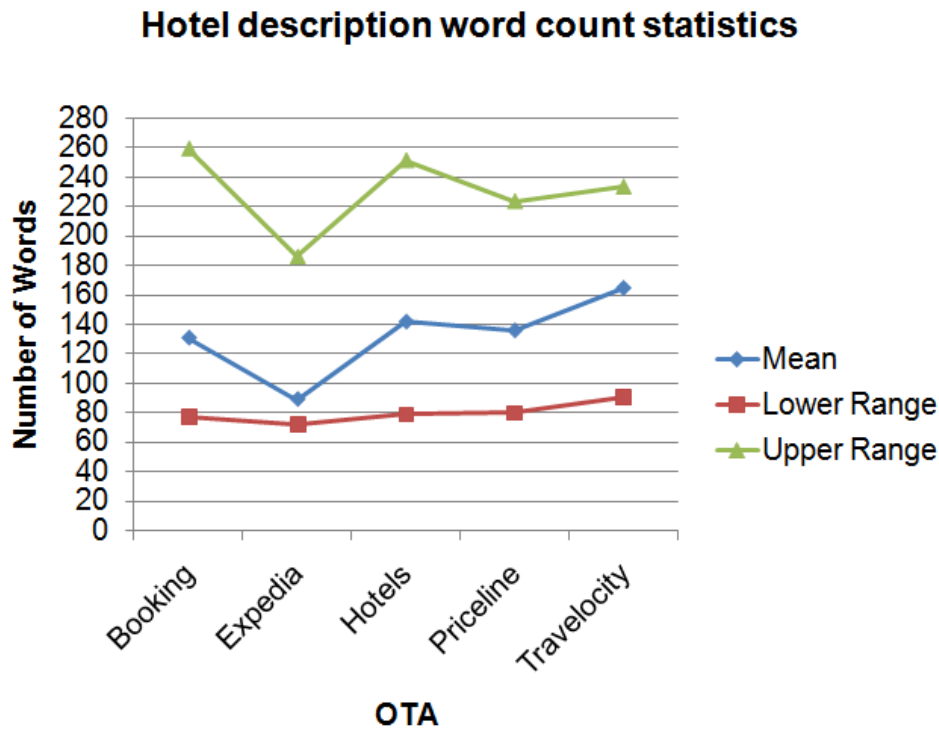
Figure 4.13. Sample hotel description formatting of each OTA

OTA	Hotel Description
Booking	Set in the heart of Ljubljana, the Best Western Premier Hotel Slon offers bright and colourful rooms, a spa area, an elegant restaurant and a well-known pastry shop. An extensive buffet breakfast with Italian Espresso Coffee is served in the stylish breakfast room.
Expedia	4-star hotel in Ljubljana near Triple Bridge Location Located in the heart of Ljubljana, this hotel is within walking distance of Franciscan Church of the Annunciation, Triple Bridge, and St. Nicholas Cathedral. Also nearby are Dragon Bridge and Ljubljana Castle.
Hotels	Location. Situated in the heart of Ljubljana, Best Western Premier Hotel Slon is within walking distance of Franciscan Church of the Annunciation, Triple Bridge, and St. Nicholas Cathedral. Also nearby are Dragon Bridge and Ljubljana Castle.
Priceline	Hotel Features The six-story Best Western offers 187 non-smoking rooms with such standard amenities as cable TV, minibars, hairdryers and 24-hour room service. Rise and shine with a free newspaper and complimentary continental breakfast. Sample international cuisine at the hotel's three restaurants and then work off your selections at the 24-hour fitness center or relax in the hot tub and sauna. For added guest convenience, the hotel offers currency exchange, concierge and laundry services. Meeting space and parking are available.
Travelocity	4-star hotel in Ljubljana near Triple Bridge With a stay at Best Western Premier Hotel Slon, you'll be centrally located in Ljubljana, steps from Franciscan Church of the Annunciation and minutes from Preseren Square. This 4-star hotel is within close proximity of Triple Bridge and Ljubljana Opera House.

Figure 4.14. Summary of hotel description formatting styles

OTA	Page Positioning		Paragraphing Style	No.	Sizes	Font	
	Location	Alignment				Style	Color
Booking	1 st frame 1 st quarter	Right	Multiple paragraphs no heading	4	1	Plain	Blue
Expedia	4 th frame 2 nd quarter	Right	Multiple paragraphs multiple headings	3	3	Plain & bold	Blue & Gray
Hotels	2 nd frame 1 st quarter	Left	Multiple paragraphs multiple headings	3	1	Plain & bold	Gray
Priceline	1 st frame 1 st quarter	Left	Single paragraph single heading	1	1	Plain	Gray
Travelocity	4 th frame 2 nd quarter	Right	Multiple paragraphs multiple headings	5	3	Plain & bold	Blue & Gray

Figure 4.15. Hotel description word count statistics



4.2.2.3 Advertising techniques

It is easy to agree with Lewis (1981) that “consumers don’t buy products or services; they buy expectations.” The use of statements that appeal to the reasoning and senses of the customer and give him or her something to look forward to are most persuasive, as they positively influence the customer’s expectations and create subconscious preference toward the particular hotel.

4.2.2.3.1 Persuasion

With Booking.com and Priceline.com, the persuasive phrases are unique to that particular description, unlike Travelocity.com and Hotels.com wherein each hotel description contains standard persuasive phrases. Surprisingly, there was a connection between the excessive use of persuasion and a decrease in information units. In Appendix E and Appendix F, we see an example of this effect, with Booking.com and Priceline.com featuring only five units of information throughout the description, Expedia.com 14 units, Travelocity.com 27 units and Hotels.com 30 units, or six times more information than Booking.com. Some examples of persuasion found on the OTAs are:

- a) Reception is open 24 hours a day, allowing you greater flexibility during your stay;
- b) Whether you are visiting for business or to explore the beautiful surroundings of rural Catalonia...;
- c) Relax after a busy day in the hotel bar or in front of the flat-screen satellite TV in your comfortable room;
- d) ...kick start your day with a hearty breakfast;
- e) The cosy hotel bar is a nice place to meet friends or colleagues for a drink;

- f) Taste Scandinavian tapas, tasty salads and hearty classics or enjoy your choice of meat or fish with great side dishes; and,
- g) There's a fine line between time to work, visiting our capital's attractions and time to rest.

4.2.2.3.2 Emotive descriptions

Emotive language aims to manipulate, influence or create feelings in us so that we adopt the viewpoint of the writer or speaker (Classen, 2014). Analysis of the hotel descriptions has shown that Booking.com has the most instances of the use of emotive description, followed by Priceline.com. The remaining OTAs do not utilize this advertising technique. Nevertheless, this technique is perfect not only for informing customers of the positive virtues of a hotel's offerings but also to alert them to the less than desirable characteristics while maintaining the appeal. For example Booking.com uses the emotive phrase "...simple, functional décor" to describe the room of a 3 star hotel and signals to the reader that the features of the room are basic. Another example is, "This atmospheric hotel is set in a renovated 16th-century building...It offers both old-world charm and modern comforts...antique-style furniture" which indicates that while neither the building's façade nor furnishings are modern they should be hailed as authentic, and not old or worse "run down." In doing so, the expectations of the traveler have been conditioned, without using plain and unappealing language. Other examples of emotive description are as follow:

- a) ...terrace with amazing views over Girona;
- b) ...whose tasteful rooms have a private bathroom;
- c) ...including the iconic Plaça Catalunya;
- d) ...wooden furniture and dark parquet floors;
- e) ...luxury cotton bed linen; and,
- f) ...offers regional cuisine using seasonal ingredients.

4.2.3 Patterns in the formulation of the hotel description within OTAs

4.2.3.1 Booking.com

Booking.com positions the hotel description within the second frame of the hotel listing web page, in blue Helvetica size 21 font (see Figure 4.13). It typically arranges the description into four paragraphs of two to three sentences. There is no consistency in terms of each paragraph being reserved for a certain theme, however, it usually begins with information on the locale in which the hotel is situated and its distance from nearby popular attractions. The style used by Booking.com consistently uses the hotel name throughout the description, which is characterized by the use of a handful of descriptive words, and occasionally persuasive phrases. At the end of the hotel description Booking.com details the number of hotel rooms and the chain or group which the hotel belongs to if applicable in this format: "We speak your language! Hotel Rooms: XX, Hotel Chain: XX" in gray font. This is a commendable practice as many hotels are affiliated; however, this is not always obvious from the hotel name.

4.2.3.2 Expedia.com

Expedia.com's hotel description is written in three Arial font sizes, which include blue headings of two sizes and paragraphs in gray (see Figure 4.13). The main heading is "(City name) hotel with a restaurant/bar/lounge/spa," or other amenity or attraction. The secondary and smaller headings are "Location," "Hotel Features" and "Room Amenities"

with text limited to one or two sentences per paragraph. The first paragraph begins with the hotels' location near city centre/airport etc. followed by three attractions. The second sentence in this section always begins with "Also nearby are" followed by two other attractions. It is customary to begin the hotel features paragraph with "In addition to a restaurant/bar/lounge," while the second sentence begins "Other amenities include." Hotel features may include restaurants, bar/lounge, coffee shop/café, cleaning/laundry services, conference centers and wireless Internet access. Internet access is always mentioned under room amenities, along with amenities such as air-conditioning, safes and desks, shower/tub combinations and designer toiletries. The majority of Expedia's descriptions (86%) are between 70 and 90 words; the shorter end of the hotel description spectrum.

4.2.3.3 Hotels.com

Hotels.com appears to utilize a template or guide in formulating its hotel descriptions, as there are innumerable recurring phrases across the hotel descriptions in the three countries. It can be assumed that Hotels.com sends a form to the hotelier to fill, after which it inputs the information into a computerized system which automatically generates the description. The OTA arranges its description into three distinct paragraphs, clearly labeled: 'Location', 'Hotel Features' and 'Guestrooms' (see Appendix G). The hotel description appears within the second frame of the web page and is written in dark gray Arial size 12, with paragraph headers and destination attractions in bold print. The 'Location' paragraph is usually brief, mentioning three or more attractions, with an average of 5. The hotel description on a whole ranges from 79 to 252 words, with an average of 143 words; the upper range of the OTA word count spectrum (see Figure 4.15 above on page 57).

The first paragraph (see Appendix G) details the hotel "Location" and attractions and is formatted as follows: a) Conveniently near (airport).../ Situated in the heart of (city).../ Situated in (city), (hotel name) is close to (attractions); and, b) Also nearby are (attractions).

The second paragraph (see Appendix G) contains information regarding "Hotel Features": a) The hotel offers (amenities/services)/ Hotel (name) has (a restaurant/coffee shop); b) Dining options at this (city/star rating) hotel include....; c) Complimentary wireless Internet access is available in public areas; d) A complimentary breakfast is served each morning./ Guests are served a complimentary breakfast each morning; e) Additional amenities include...; f) Business amenities at this (star rating) hotel/ Business amenities at this (star rating) property include; g) The staff can provide (services); h) For a surcharge.../ ...offered for a surcharge; i) Onsite parking is complimentary/ Guest parking is complimentary/ Guest parking is available for a surcharge; and, j) This is a smoke free property/ The property has designated areas for smoking.

The third paragraph (see Appendix G) informs the reader about amenities in the "Guest Rooms": a) The (number) guestrooms at (hotel) include/ The (number) air-conditioned guest rooms include (laptop-compatible safes, minibars, complimentary newspapers, coffee/tea makers); b) Complimentary wireless high-speed Internet access is provided/ Guests can use the in-room complimentary wireless high-speed Internet access; c) Rooms are equipped with (plasma TVs, flat-screen TVs, LED TVs); d) (Type and size) televisions.../ Televisions are equipped with (satellite channels, digital channels, cable channels, pay movies, free movie channels); e) Beds have (down comforters, premium bedding, pillowtop mattresses); f) Pillow menus are available; g) Bathrooms offer (tub combinations, designer toiletries, bidets, hair dryers); h) All accommodations provide

(desks, phones); i) Additional amenities include (complimentary toiletries, blackout drapes/curtains); j)...amenities available on request include (hair dryers, irons/ironing boards, hypo-allergenic bedding); and, k) Housekeeping is offered daily/ Turndown service is offered nightly and housekeeping is available daily.

With the Hotels.com description format there is no need for hoteliers to awaken their creativity as the OTA has innumerable ways to formulate each sentence. A study of their content will show that there are no unique phrases as the arrangement of each sentence has up to four predetermined formats, with the details of the particular hotel inserted where necessary. If an item is not applicable to the hotel it is simply omitted.

4.2.3.4 Priceline

The description is usually one paragraph consisting of at least seven sentences in gray Helvetica font (from the Arial family) with the heading “Hotel Features,” however, a small number have featured three paragraphs under the headings “Hotel Features,” “Hotel Location,” and “Guest Favorites.” The first sentence discloses the location of the attraction in relation to any popular amenities or attractions; however, the remainder of the description does not follow a particular order. Notwithstanding, there are often instances of persuasion and the use of emotive words. The OTA often details the number of minutes in walking distance to reach an attraction, or the distance in kilometers. The last sentences habitually indicate available modes of transportation or attractions in the vicinity. It is interesting to note that the hotel description is duplicated on the page in the facilities and policies section. Along with Booking.com, Priceline.com was twice as likely to mention transportation modes when compared to the others. Similarly, as a result of both OTAs belonging to the same company, they often share the same hotel description.

4.2.3.5 Travelocity.com

The description has 2 blue headings of different sizes which precede five paragraphs written in smaller gray font (see Figure 4.13). The first header highlights the city in which the hotel is located along with the hotels premier facility, while the smaller header details the location of the hotel within the city and lists key attractions. The first paragraph is typically brief and continues with other attractions “within close proximity” and mentions the hotel star rating if it is 4 stars or higher. The second paragraph begins with, “Make yourself at home in one of the (number of rooms) air-conditioned rooms...” and is often accompanied by the phrases “(amenity) is available for your entertainment” and “Complimentary wireless Internet access keeps you connected.” The following sentence commences “Conveniences include...” The line “Quench your thirst with your favorite drink” is often used to begin the third paragraph if the hotel features a bar/ lounge, or the phrase “Satisfy your appetite” if there is a restaurant. The last paragraph begins with the phrase “Featured amenities include...” or “Planning an event in (city name)?” It is standard practice for Travelocity to mention if an amenity is offered “during limited hours,” “for a fee,” “for a surcharge” and the number of hotel rooms. The OTA was twice as likely to mention bathroom details in its description versus the other OTAs, and three times as likely to mention business services. Although the web pages of Travelocity and Expedia.com are very similar, the hotel description content is different. One can observe that the predetermined phrases employed in the description are persuasive in nature, and enhance the appeal of the information.

4.3 What are the common themes across the hotel description genre?

This section will be divided based on the themes derived from the analysis of the hotel descriptions, and each will be discussed individually. The top amenities and facilities across the most common categories will be shown, as well as their popularity by hotel star rating. The OTAs with the highest propensity to feature a particular offering in the hotel description will be mentioned throughout.

4.3.1 Hotel description themes

A content analysis of 150 hotel descriptions of 30 hotels featured on five OTAs was performed using eight categories:

Hotel Information

- a) Bathroom;
- b) Business;
- c) Food and Beverage (F&B);
- d) Leisure;
- e) Room; and,
- f) Special Information.

Locale Information

- a) Attractions, Amenities and Activities' (AAA); and,
- b) Transportation.

Results show that information pertaining to “Room Amenities” and “AAA,” were featured in 100% of the descriptions, suggesting that OTAs found travelers to be desirous of this information (see Figure 4.16). When the hotel descriptions were aggregated it was revealed that information pertaining to the hotel room accounted for a total of 28% of the text, the highest of the eight coding categories (see Figure 4.17).

Figure 4.16. Percentage of descriptions in which each theme was coded

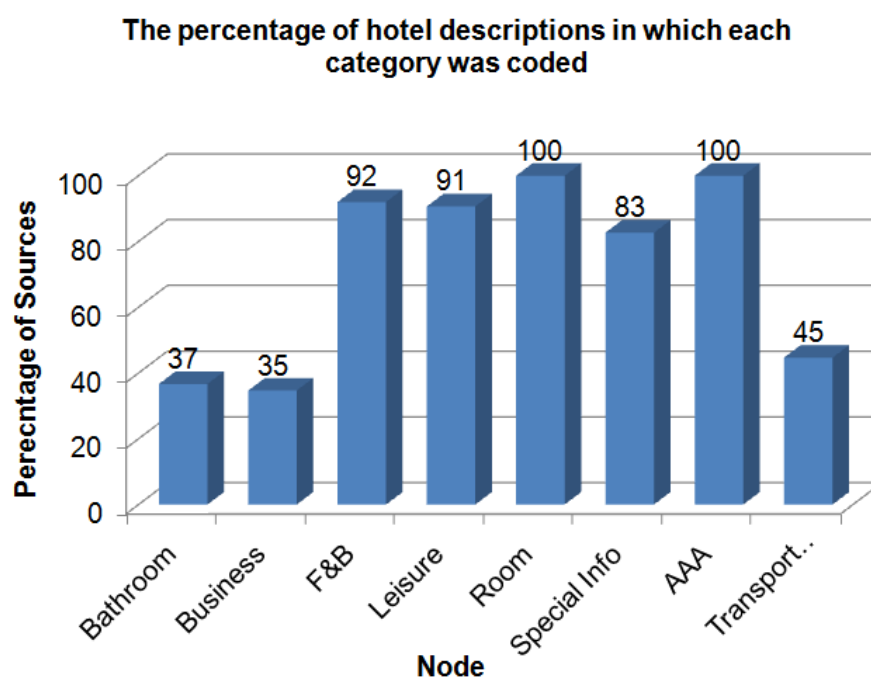
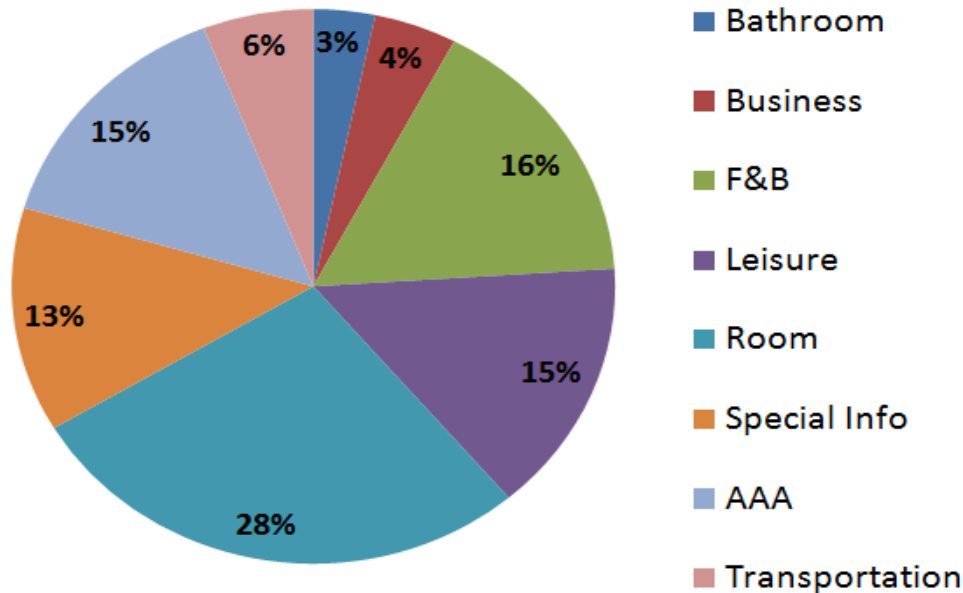


Figure 4.17. Aggregated hotel description composition by theme

A breakdown of hotel description information content by information categories



4.3.2 Hotel information

4.3.2.1 Popular amenities and facilities based on theme and hotel rating

A content analysis was also conducted to determine which amenities were frequently mentioned by the OTAs based on hotel rating. It was discovered that there were differences between the popularity of amenities among hotels of different ratings, probably owing to the fact that lower rated hotels do not possess some luxury amenities and the propensity of higher rated hotels to assume that prospective clients do not need to be informed of basic amenities (see Table 4.2). Nevertheless, complimentary Internet access took the top spot across all three star groupings. A word frequency analysis of the five major hotel information nodes revealed the most popular features in each area, with toiletries (bathroom), restaurant (F&B), free wi-fi (leisure), free wi-fi (room) and free parking (special information) dominating the top spots for each category (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1. Top amenities/facilities by hotel information sub-category

Rank	Bathroom	F&B	Leisure	Room	Special Info.
1.	Toiletries	Restaurant	Complimentary wireless Internet	Complimentary wireless Internet	Parking
2.	Hair dryers	Bar	Terrace	Air conditioning	Multilingual staff
3.	Shower	Lounge	Sauna	Phones	Laundry Service
4.	Shower/tub combination	Breakfast	Spa	Flat screen TV	Tour/ticket assistance
5.	Bathtubs	Café	Pool	Safes	Dry cleaning

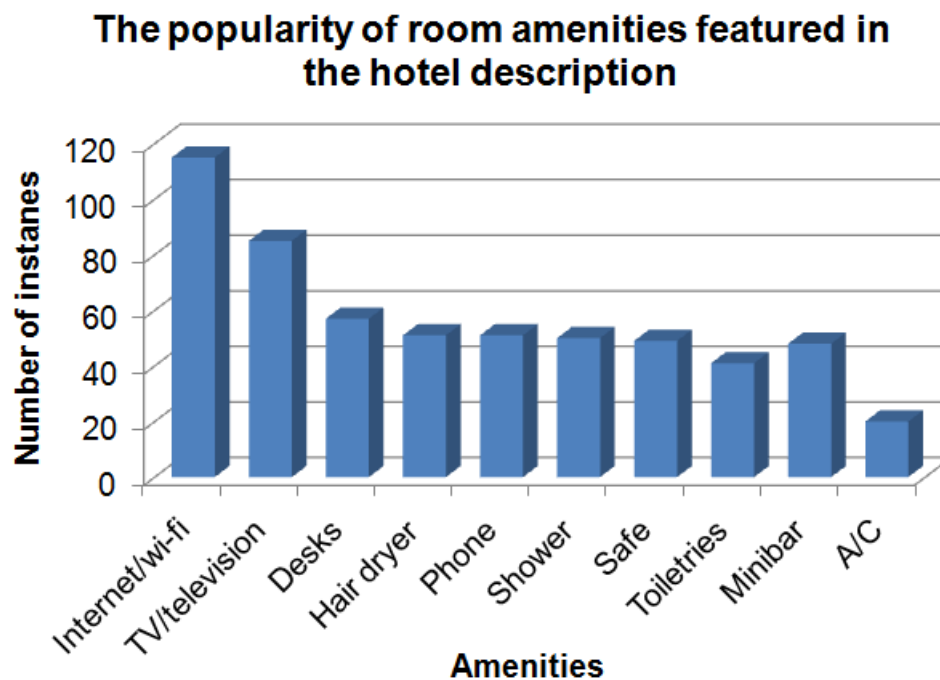
Table 4.2. The popularity of amenities and facilities in the hotel description among star groupings

Rank	Star Grouping		
	1 and 2 star	3 star	4 star
1.	Complimentary wireless Internet	Complimentary wireless Internet	Complimentary wireless Internet
2.	Bar	Bar	Bar
3.	Lounge	Restaurant	Restaurant
4.	Air conditioning	Lounge	Lounge
5.	Laundry services	Flat screen TV	Shower/tub combination
6.	Dry cleaning	Hair dryer	Business centre
7.	Hair dryer	Free parking	Room service
8.	Flat screen TV	Complimentary breakfast	Café
9.	Desk	Multilingual staff	Meeting rooms
10.	Tour/ticket assistance	Desks	Toiletries

4.3.2.2 Room amenities

The analysis performed on room amenities in the current study showed that Internet access was the amenity most frequently mentioned in descriptions (see Figure 4.18). A catalogue of offerings revealed a total of 47 unique items across all descriptions (see column 3 and 4 of Appendix H). The television was the most described in room feature with details usually available on the size and type. Lower rated hotels tend to include basic offerings such as desks in the description.

Figure 4.18. Room amenities by popularity



4.3.2.3 Bathroom amenities

Bathroom information received the least attention of all the information categories accounting for only 3% of total content (see Figure 4.17 page 62). It is theorized that when

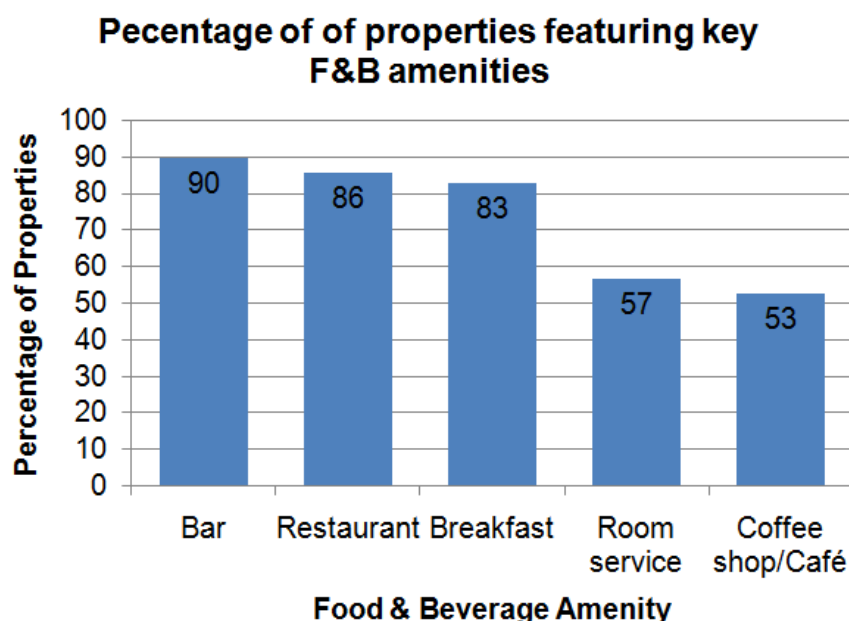
there is no bathroom amenity worth mentioning, the OTAs simply state “private bathroom with a shower.” Nevertheless, the most popular amenities are toiletries and hair dryers (see Table 4.1 on page 62), and this perhaps explains why in late 2012, Intercontinental hotels, and five Marriott brands, including Ritz Carlton introduced new designer shampoo lines with hopes of attracting quality conscious guests (DeLollis, 2012). Four star hotels were more likely to offer premium amenities such as slippers and bathrobes.

4.3.2.4 Food and beverage

The content analysis revealed that 86% of all hotels had onsite restaurants, and 100% of 4 star hotels (see Figure 4.19). Similarly, 90% had bars, with Travelocity having the distinction of mentioning 100% of the hotels that featured bars on property. Coffee shops/cafés were located on 53% of the properties in the sample. Some descriptions described the cuisine prepared by the restaurant (for example Danish), as well as kid-friendly, vegetarian, gluten free menu options or a wine selection. Two hotels from the sample of 30 offered free coffee and tea in the lobby. Room service was offered by 57% of hotels, whether limited or 24 hour, with Travelocity.com five times as likely to mention this offering.

It was found that 83% of hotels offered breakfast, 56% on a complimentary basis and 10% for a fee, with 43% serving the meal buffet style. All 4 star hotels offered breakfast, and was also the only star rating category to provide it for a fee. It is surprising that some OTAs mention breakfast but neglect to mention whether it is complimentary or there is a charge; a few cases were observed wherein it was not mentioned that the breakfast was complimentary, even though it was (based on a cross comparison of descriptions). Hotels.com was most likely to indicate if the breakfast was complimentary. There was no consistency in mentioning that breakfast was available, with some descriptions omitting the availability of breakfast, even complimentary breakfast, however, Hotels.com and Travelocity.com were most likely to mention this amenity. Travelocity.com also mentioned in some instances that lunch and dinner was also served.

Figure 4.19. The popularity of key F&B amenities



4.3.2.5 Leisure

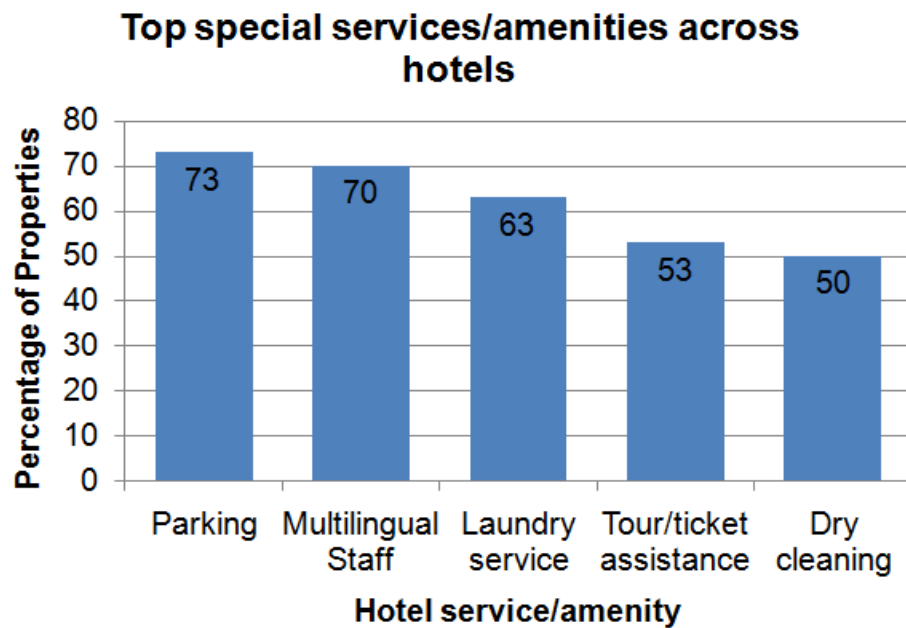
Of the 150 sources coded, 90% included leisure information, with all hotels recording leisure offerings in at least one of their five descriptions. The top leisure offerings were complimentary wireless Internet (public area), a terrace/garden, sauna, spa and pool. Analysis showed that 93% of hotels offered wi-fi in public areas, while 50% had a terrace or garden. Denmark had the widest variety of leisure activities, which included sports such as bowling, croquet, mini golf, pool and air hockey. Common onsite leisure facilities included gyms and health clubs, which are most likely to be present in 4 star hotels; and less popular ones such as a library or TV in the lobby. Spa services were also popular and included facials, body treatments and massage treatments (See column 2 of Appendix H for a full list of hotel leisure offerings and activities). Innovations in this area included a free evening social that was hosted each day by one hotel, and notebook rental. Others offered courtesies such as free tea and coffee in the lobby, and newspapers. Family friendly offerings included a barbecue area, barbecue grill, a playground, benches and outdoor chess, and adult friendly ones such as hot tubs, steam room.

4.3.2.6 Special information

There was a wealth of information provided in the hotel descriptions that did not correspond to the initial coding categories, and as such these were labeled “special information.” From the 150 descriptions coded, 85% contained information regarding special services and amenities. Parking availability was mentioned for 70% of hotels, with Expedia being the least likely to mention the amenity; just 7% of its descriptions. Even though multilingual staff ranked third in the category special information, Hotels.com and Travelocity.com were responsible for 97% of instances. In some instances there was a surcharge for parking; however, parking for motorcycles was free. Other popular amenities included laundry service, tour/ticket assistance and dry cleaning (see Figure 4.20).

More than half the hotels in the study offered tour-ticket assistance or concierge services. In addition to booking tours off site, hotels also offer bicycle rentals and golf club discounts, and are willing to arrange airport transfers, car rentals, or train station pickups. Some properties also boast a library, currency exchange, news stand, gift shop, computer station and hair salon onsite. A computer station or TV in the lobby is offered in some hotels, as well as storage for luggage, skis, and bicycle. Descriptive words such as kid-friendly, business friendly or eco-friendly were used to provide additional insight into the operations of the hotels. A few properties offered value added services such as childcare, in room massage and wedding services. Some hotels are completely smoke free, while others have designated areas for smoking. In this light, common phrases were often used to make travelers aware of limited front office hours, parking surcharge or turndown service. Front desk services included express check-in and check-out and a safe for valuables.

Figure 4.20. Top services/amenities in the special information category



4.3.3 Locale information

The OTAs featured in this study have made progress in the provision of locale information as attractions feature prominently in each hotel description. Booking.com even offers browsers the chance to view hotels in a destination that are closest to particular attractions such as museums, activities such as golf, and amenities such as conference centers. For persons who are unfamiliar with the offerings of a destination, a quick scan of the major OTAs will provide an insight into the popular attractions, with each mentioning between six and nine attractions per hotel description. Interestingly, the most highlighted location is the “city center” or “heart” with 89 and 45 mentions respectively in the sample of 150 descriptions examined.

4.3.3.1 Attractions, amenities and activities

A total of 47 attractions were mentioned around the Esbjerg area, 30 in Ljubljana and 28 for Girona (See Appendix I). Considering that there were 50 descriptions for each destination, it is not surprising that the top Ljubljana attraction the Triple Bridge was featured 31 times and Fire de Girona Convention Centre the most popular in Girona with 44 instances found (see Figure 4.21).

Figure 4.21. OTAs provide travelers with attraction information

Ranking	Top Attraction in Each City		
	Esbjerg	Ljubljana	Girona
1.	Esbjerg Art Museum	Triple Bridge	Girona Cathedral
2.	Esbjerg Golf Club	Dragon Bridge	Arab Baths
3.	Esbjerg Performing Arts Centre	Ljubljana Castle	The Walls
4.	Esbjerg Musikhus	St. Nicholas Cathedral	Fira de Girona Convention Centre
5.	Viking Museum	Franciscan Church of the Annunciation	Castle of Montjuic

4.3.3.2 Transportation

All the destinations in the current study were relatively close to airports, with the primary airports situated less than 30 minutes away, and in the case of two of the destinations, there was an additional airport less than an hour away. The hotel descriptions tell the properties' distance from modes of transportation including train stations, bus stations, bus stops, major highways and airports. In Ljubljana, it is customary for hotels to provide shuttles, or limo/town car service. In destinations where such services appear to be the norm, guests may be motivated to choose based on the availability of these value added offerings. Booking.com and Priceline.com were most likely to include information about transportation modes available and the distance from transportation centers. It was also observed that some descriptions would state the ease of travelling from one destination to the other, as is the case of Girona and Barcelona.

4.4 Are OTAs presenting consistent textual information?

This section focuses on information consistency across select dimensions of the hotel listings, namely: business services, the content of the hotel descriptions, the hotel star rating and guest review score. The aim was to ascertain if all the OTAs were presenting the same information for each hotel, and in the case of the guest review score to analyze the disparity which exists between OTAs. Likewise, a consistency test was conducted on a third (50) of the hotel descriptions to compare and contrast the amenities, facilities and services that the OTAs presented for each hotel. In order to do so, each unit of information presented by the OTAs in the hotel description for each property was listed in a table (e.g. hair dryer, shower/tub combination and toiletries under the bathroom category). Thereafter, the number of OTAs mentioning each unit of information e.g. "ticket/tour assistance" was tallied. The results are interesting.

4.4.1 Information provision and consistency

While the original intention was to sample an equal number of 1-2, 3 and 4 star hotels in each destination, this proved impossible as it was difficult to find listings for the same 1-2 star hotels across all five OTAs, and furthermore, the Danish market was monopolized by 3 star hotels. Therefore, the final star rating tally is proportionally representative of the ratings of hotels in each destination. This means that if there were three hotels of the 2 star category in a destination of 20 hotels, the sampling would only account for one hotel, in order to derive a representative sample. Across all three destinations, the sample consists of four hotels in the 1-2 star category, 17 in the 3 star category and nine in the 4 star category. This means there are 20 descriptions for 1-2 star hotels, 85 for 3 star hotels and 45 for 4 star hotels; because descriptions were sampled for each hotel on all five OTAs.

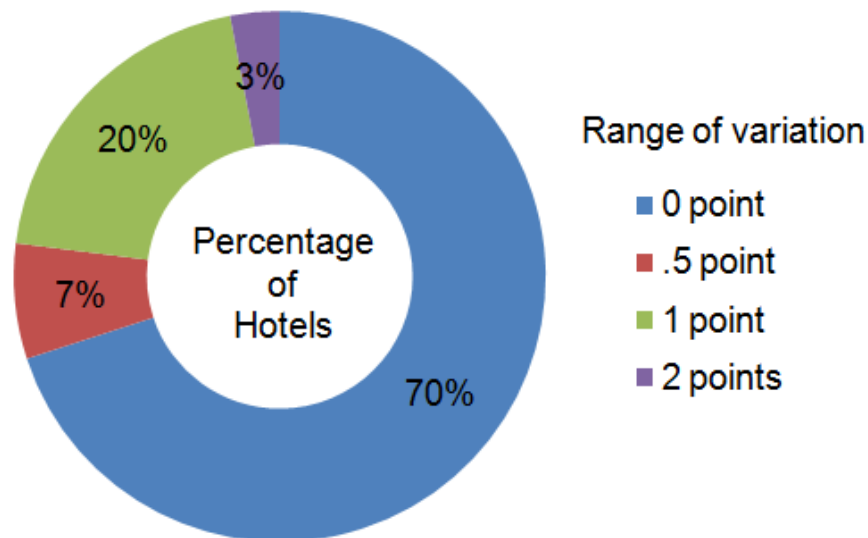
4.4.1.1 Star rating

An audit of the star ratings for each of the 30 hotels in the study across the five OTAs was conducted and it was found that 70% of the hotels had a consistent star rating (including one 3 star hotel that was not rated on one OTA) while the remainder varied between .5 point and 2 points (see Figure 4.22). The most extreme is the case of the Best Western Premier Hotel Slon in Ljubljana, Slovenia which is rated as a 3 star hotel on Priceline.com, 5 stars on Hotels.com and 4 stars on the other sites (see Appendix J for a detailed breakdown). Expedia and Travelocity consistently displayed the same rating. Even though the hotel descriptions for Booking.com and Priceline.com are often similar

they only share the same star rating 83% of the time. There was no evidence that a particular OTA was over estimating the star rating of its listings.

Figure 4.22. Range of hotel star rating variation among OTAs

Range of hotel star rating variation among OTAs



4.4.1.2 Hotel description information content

In order to understand the concept of “units of information,” consider the following sentence: “Make yourself at home in one of the 28 air-conditioned rooms featuring flat-screen televisions.” Here one can conclude that there are: a) 28 rooms; b) rooms are air-conditioned, and c) rooms contain flat screen TVs. Therefore, there are three units of information. In the study, it was found that on average 48 units of information are available for each hotel; and that a positive relationship exists between higher rated hotels and an increase in the number of information units present in the description (see Figure 4.23). The analysis of the information units contained in the hotel descriptions revealed that hotels rated 4 stars have longer descriptions on average and contain more units of information; especially in room information and special information categories (see Figure 4.24) with details such as the availability of concierge service or laundry service.

Each OTA features on average 55% of the total information available for each hotel, with Hotels.com having the highest average units of information per description (see Figure 4.25). Along with Travelocity.com this OTA featured more information than the others 60% of the time. There was a correlation between word count and information units, with Expedia.com consistently having the lowest word count and information content. These results demonstrate that the hotelier and the OTA should thoughtfully decide which amenities and services are worth mentioning in the hotel description, and decide on those which should be listed further on the web page under Hotel Facilities or Hotel Amenities; in order to highlight features which have a positive effect on incremental revenue.

A detailed tally of the information units provided for the hotels revealed the omission of pertinent information. The fact is, the exclusion of services such as tour/ticket assistance or meeting rooms could mean the loss business, as hotels usually receive commission for

each customer recommended to local tour companies, and clients usually request food and beverage for their meetings. There have also been instances where the OTAs have given different figures for the number of rooms in the hotel; as in the case of Best Western Premier Hotel Slon where Priceline.com states that there are 187 rooms while Hotels.com, Booking.com and Travelocity.com states 168. These are just a handful of instances where information was neglected (see Appendix K for the results of the consistency study). Interestingly, there was a negative correlation between the use of persuasion and the number of information units (see Appendix E and Appendix F).

Figure 4.23. Average units of information by hotel star rating

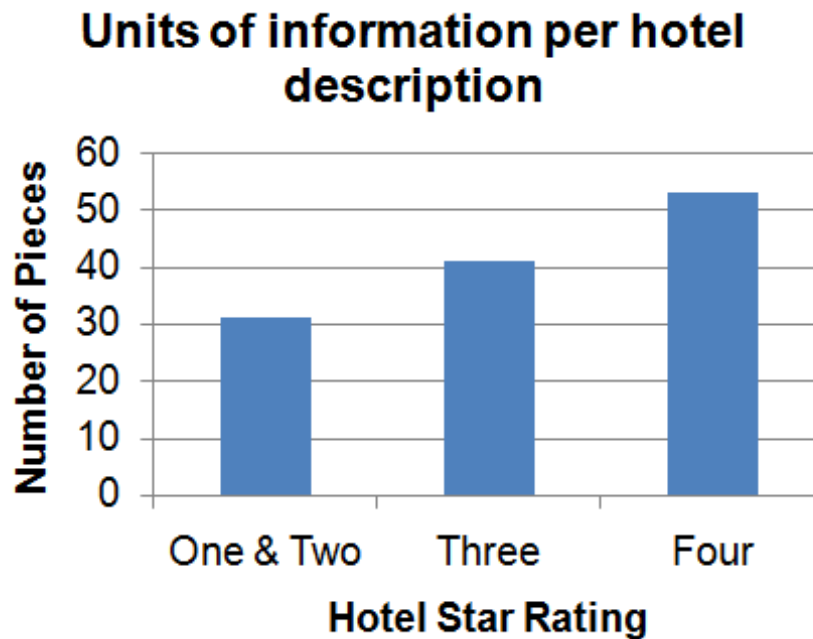


Figure 4.24. Units of information per information category by hotel star rating

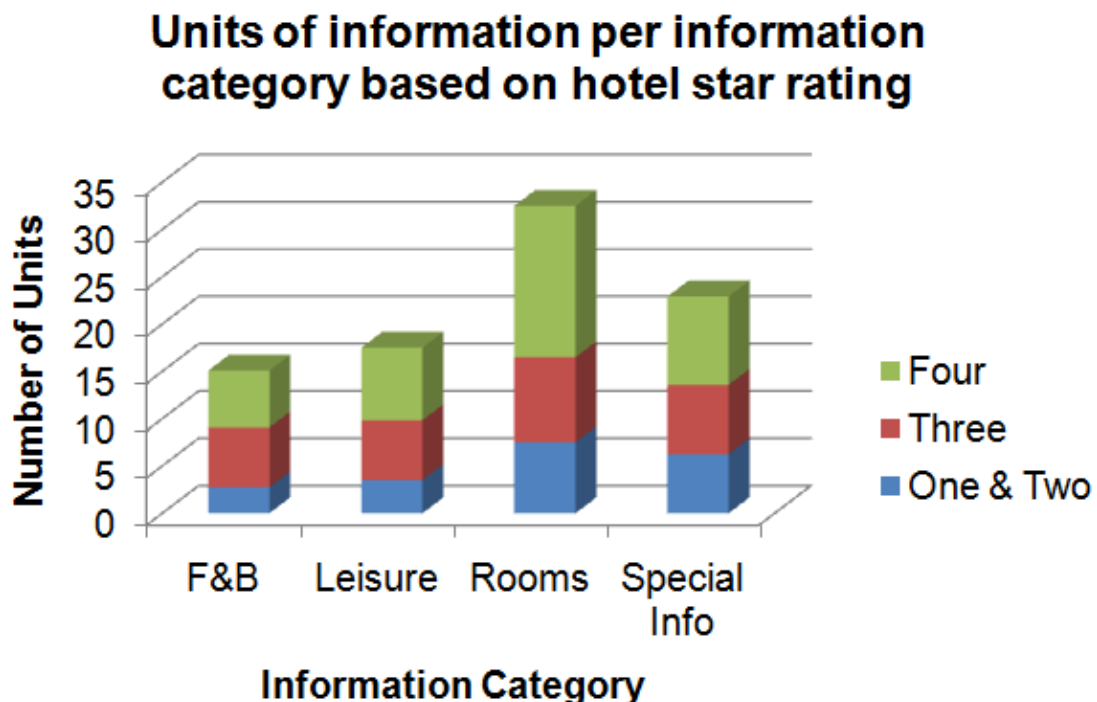
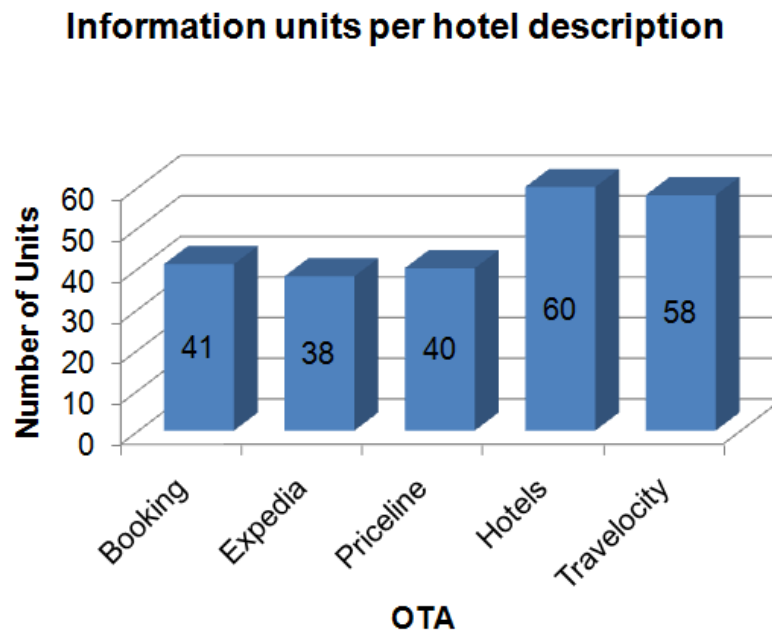


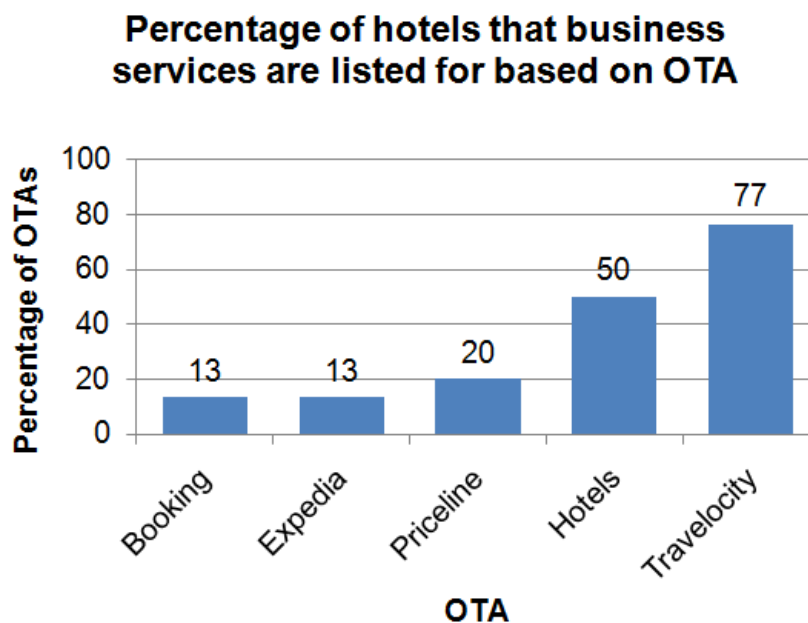
Figure 4.25. Average units of information per hotel description (by OTA)



4.4.1.2.1 Business services

Business travel is defined as “all nondiscretionary trips which occur either explicitly for the purpose of engaging in work, or incidentally in the course of conducting work-related activities” (Ritchie, 2000, p. 63). Business services found in the hotels examined during this study include conference rooms, meeting rooms and business centers. In the analysis of the hotel descriptions, 50% of 1-2 star hotels, 63% of 3 star hotels and 90% of 4 star hotels were found to feature business services. Nevertheless, business services were not always mentioned for hotels with said services. As a result it was found that Travelocity and Hotels.com were up to six times more likely to mention the business offerings of a hotel than the other OTAs (see Figure 4.26).

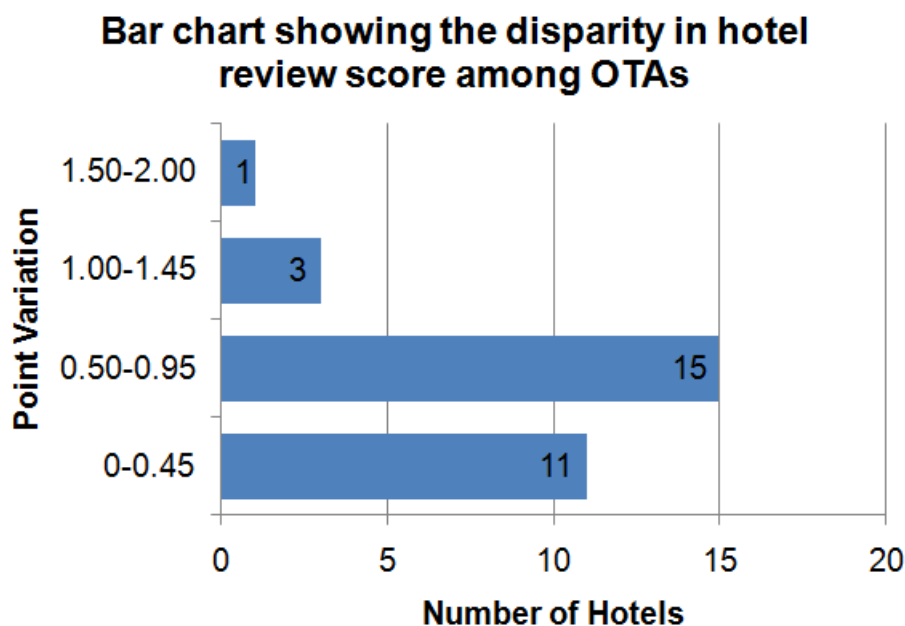
Figure 4.26. Percentage of hotels for which each OTA included business services



4.4.1.3 Guest review ratings

In addition to their own reviews, Expedia.com, Hotels.com and Travelocity.com displays the Trip Advisor score for each hotel and provide links to the site. The OTAs boast that their reviews have been verified, as only clients are allowed to post a review following their stay. Booking.com and Priceline.com score their reviews out of 10, while the others use a scale of 1 to 5. Analysis of the sample showed that lowest variation was 0.15 point; with the largest being 1.85 points (see Figure 4.27, and Appendix L for detailed statistics). The greatest disparities were observed in cases where an OTA had aggregated a handful of reviews to provide the guest review score for a hotel; most of which were negative. This can be very damaging to a hotel as travelers may refrain from booking the hotel due to the low review score (Aral, 2014).

Figure 4.27. Bar chart showing the disparity in hotel review score among OTAs



4.5 Summary of results

In summary, we see that even though there are eight website dimensions, the most important website functions are those regarding reservations/pricing, personalization, and value enhancement, with the majority dedicated to the latter. It is evident that most of the 70 unique elements found on the hotel listing pages correspond to general elements groupings, such as, text, drop down boxes, links, dynamic content and symbols; and are designed and used to keep customers on the website and to make reservations with a sense of urgency. Some of the most noticeable elements served to provide hotel suggestions, ask for customer feedback, give snapshots of guest reviews, signal the limited availability of room stock or promotions, and allow the user to customize the experience by saving hotels to a list. These innovative features show that OTAs are using both customer information and their own data to provide a satisfactory booking experience. The elements featured on the hotel listing page are colorful, attractive and easy to understand. It is also recognized that some OTAs have outdone others regarding this aspect of the hotel listing, by offering more features. Nevertheless, the OTAs have indeed made good use of website functions in providing a user-friendly, personalized and value added experience.

The basic factors to enable a website to function as an OTA have been identified as: hotel name, address and star rating; search box; picture slideshow; hotel description; map of hotel location; room prices, types and availability; guest reviews; hotel facilities; hotel policies; and, suggested hotels. The majority of the hotel listing pages contains the basic information and reservation factors (features), with one OTA providing a link to two critical factors on an adjoining page. Still, the arrangements of these basic features and the accompanying features vary among OTAs. While the OTAs provide pictures of the hotels in ample sizes and numbers, picture quality and framing was an issue on some OTAs. The OTAs favor the use of blue and gray, while other colors are used to emphasize important content. The text/background color combinations were user-friendly, with textual structures such as headings, paragraphs and bold print used to enhance readability and retention in users. They were also fond of Arial type fonts which are plain fonts. The word count varied within and among OTAs with a positive correlation between the description word count and hotel star rating. The use of advertising techniques was evident; however usage was generally restricted to two types; persuasion and emotive description. Two OTAs utilized unique instances of persuasion, while another two had recurring instances (same phrases). Only two OTAs employed emotive description. Emotive description was not only used to enhance hotel perception, but to allude to less than desirable qualities in an appealing manner; “authentic façade” versus “rundown building.” It can therefore be concluded that hotel descriptions lack the level of rhetorical dexterity necessary to promoting mental imagery processing in users.

The hotel descriptions of each OTA were examined for patterns. It was found that an OTA tends to utilize the same number of paragraphs per description, as well as any headings and text colors. Similarly, Expedia.com, Hotels.com, and Travelocity.com present specific categories of information in the same location of the description (e.g. attractions information in the first paragraph). On the same note, some OTAs presented the most important hotel offering in heading format (e.g. Ljubljana hotel with a spa). Investigations show that the descriptions of Hotels.com have a predetermined format due to the presence of multiple recurring phrases; these kinds of phrases were also present to a lesser extent on Travelocity.com. This means that the wording of each Hotels.com description is essentially the same with the only difference being the amenities and facilities, and so on, that are particular to each hotel. Booking.com was consistent in providing affiliation (chain or independent) information for each hotel; and this is not always evident from the hotel name. Research suggests that in light of the information overload on the Internet, brand names serve as a substitute for physical facilities and help to build trust where the product cannot be tested before purchase (Gretzel et al., 2000).

Expedia.com’s descriptions were brief and to the point, yet sufficient, while Hotels.com and Travelocity.com had lengthy emotive descriptions. All the OTAs mentioned attractions in close proximity to the hotel, while Priceline.com and Booking.com usually provided transportation details. Travelocity.com and Hotels.com were also likely to mention special conditions such as surcharges.

Of the eight hotel description themes identified, Room and “Attractions, Amenities and Activities” were the sole themes present in 100% of the sample, with the least featured theme was Business, in only 35% of descriptions. Room information accounted for almost a third of the content analyzed, and it is therefore surmised that room offerings are considered by OTAs and hoteliers to be most important in the hotel decision-making process. Across categories the most important offerings were: toiletries (bathroom); restaurant (F&B); free wi-fi (leisure); free wi-fi (room); and, free parking (special

information). On the other hand, their popularity based on hotel star rating revealed that complimentary wireless Internet and hotel bar were the top offerings, with Internet access offered by all hotels.

Television was the second most popular in room amenity across all star categories, with its size and type usually detailed. Bathroom was one of the least featured themes, with 4 star hotels most likely to mention amenities here. In the category food and beverage, 86% of hotels were found to have onsite restaurants, 90% had bars, and 83% offered breakfast, with 1 and 2 star properties least likely to feature these offerings. It was discovered that particular OTAs were more likely to mention a particular offer, for example, Travelocity.com was keen on restaurants and room service. Leisure offerings were mentioned in 90% of the descriptions, with 4 star hotels most likely to have a gym or spa onsite. Special information served as the category for miscellaneous items such as the often mentioned parking or multilingual staff. Descriptive words such as kid-friendly were included in this category, and served to appeal to specific segments such as families with small children. Common phrases were also used to make travelers aware of conditions such as “this is a smoke free property” and “shuttles offered for a surcharge.”

For locale information, the most popular items featured were the “city centre” or “heart” of the destination. For travelers unaware of the popular sights in a destination, the OTAs gave ample recommendations, with distances often indicated. The overall number of attractions mentioned per destination is 35 on average, with the most iconic attractions mentioned in the majority of descriptions. Concerning transportation, Booking.com and Priceline.com were most likely to mention airports, bus stations and train stations.

Consistency analyses revealed disparities in the provision of hotel information. Some OTAs were more likely than others to mention business services, up to six times more. Only 70% of hotels had a consistent star rating across OTAs, with differences ranging between .5 and 2 points. The greatest disparities in guest reviews were noted in cases where only a handful of mostly negative reviews were aggregated to provide a score; up to 1.85 points. On average there were 48 units of information available for each hotel with a positive correlation between star rating and units of information. Nevertheless, OTAs only featured 55% of the total available information, with Hotels.com and Travelocity.com consistently featuring at least 60%. It was found that even a pertinent offering such as complimentary breakfast was often omitted from a hotel’s description. An unexpected finding was the negative relationship between the use of persuasion and the number of information units.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Website features and elements

Analyzing the features of tourism website has been popular with researchers, yet none have sought to categorize the elements found on OTA websites. The investigation into the website elements used to provide a user-friendly browsing experience revealed the presence of over 70 elements. This is similar to the findings of Murphy et al. (1996) who examined 36 hotel websites and found 36 distinct features utilize. One can imagine that 18 years ago the features were somewhat basic and have evidently doubled since then to include more value added ones. The authors reported that the most effective hotel websites were those that gave customers the easiest and most rewarding access to relevant and related information (cited in Zafiropoulos & Vrana, 2006). The findings of the current

study concur, as there were many value added features which gave information such as location, links to travel guides and access to guest reviews.

Law and Hsu (2005) adopted the website dimensions of Chung and Law (2003) and derived five dimensions and 40 attributes which were presented to both travelers and hotel managers. The results showed that the perceptions of the two groups regarding the importance of each dimension varied slightly. In the study, travelers rated reservation information and facilities information as the two most important dimensions, with surrounding area information perceived as the second least important dimension. On the other hand, hotel managers reported facilities information and reservation information as most important (the reverse) with surrounding area information perceived as least important (Law & Hsu, 2005). Finally, we can add the perception of online travel agencies to this body of research based on the positioning of content related to each dimension.

Two of the three OTA's perceived reservation information as most important, and facilities information as second in importance, while the remaining showed the reverse to be true. In fact, these OTAs load the hotel listing page with the "Room type, price and availability" frame in perspective (although it is the second frame of the web page) bypassing the first frame which holds the slideshow (see and Appendix C and Appendix D). Zafiroopoulos and Vrana (2006) also used a similar scheme to rate the importance of six dimensions as perceived by Greek hoteliers and concurred that facilities information was most important. Notwithstanding, the study showed that the hoteliers lent little importance to reservations information, while the current study and the Law and Hsu (2005) found this to be of great importance. In a similar light, survey data from Novak and Schwabe (2009) proposed that travel information should centre around location and reservation information. Regarding location, all the OTAs featured a location map or link to allow users to analyze the locale in which the property is located.

On a further note regarding reservation information, researchers found that "limited availability promotes consumer purchase decisions and reduces further search intention because of the intensified desire to acquire a product" (Aggarwal & Vaidyanathan, 2003). Likewise, it was also revealed that uncertainty concerning product availability serves to increase the anticipated losses of not buying (Byun & Sternquist, 2012). Parallel to the these studies, it was seen that the OTAs provided minute by minute information regarding the number of rooms available at a property, as well as the number of travelers viewing the particular hotel, and how many have booked the property recently. This shows that the OTAs are aware of the urge which such tactics incite and they know that customers prefer to be safe by booking a hotel if availability is limited; which increases the rate of booking.

Website personalization is pertinent to delivering services in online applications, and is achieved by collecting information from users (Razali, Tan Soo, Razak, & Hanapi, 2010). Kobsa and Teltzrow (2004) found that respondents reacted positively to personalization, where 59% of users saw personalization in a positive light and 51% would readily provide information to receive a personalized experience (cited in Razali et al., 2010). With the OTAs, we saw that information was collected and utilized without the explicit consent of the user, and while the resulting offers are beneficial to the decision-making process, privacy issues could arise if other users who share the computer are greeted with suggestions from information entered by another user. In this regard, it may be prudent for the OTA to use a simple pop-up box to confirm that the user is in agreement with this use of information.

Researchers reported that customer contact information such as “feedback” links, FAQs and call centre numbers contribute to the responsiveness of a corporate website, and are recognized for their ability to foster relationships with existing and future clients “because they provide an opportunity for continuous dialogue” (Palmer, 2002; Yoon et al., 2008). Similarly, Voorveld, van Noort, and Duijn (2013), opined that a higher degree of perceived interactivity in a brand Website was related to a more positive brand relationship quality. These tools were found on all OTAs and in accordance with the above-mentioned sources, one could declare that these interactive features “contribute to website interactivity” and customer loyalty, and the OTA websites can therefore be declared as user-friendly and customer-centered.

Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) demonstrated that social media is valuable in managing customer relations, with many tourism organizations “integrating social media applications into their websites to enhance customers’ travel information searching experience” (Sanchez-Franco & Rondan-Cataluña, 2010). Kasavana, Nusair, and Teodosic (2010) recognized that Facebook acted as an alternative web-based tool to respond to customer inquiries (Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). For the OTAs that provided links to social media, it was found that Facebook and Twitter were most popular and it can be assumed that these sites were offered in hopes that customers may utilize them to make contact with OTA personnel regarding reservation related issues, as well as view ongoing promotions and be prompted to visit the site to make a booking.

The advent of dynamic page generation is motivated by impetus to deliver customized and personalized page content. Dynamic scripting technologies allows OTAs to generate special content in real time in an attempt to tailor the page to each individual user (Datta, Dutta, Ramamritham, Thomas, & VanderMeer, 2001). Though it is difficult to tell which OTA introduced each innovative feature, for example “number of persons currently viewing the hotel listing,” the fact is that nothing remains novel as sooner or later all the OTAs adopt the feature. Researchers proclaimed that novelty in the online environment is quickly imitated and the aura of awe disappears accordingly, and for this reason should be accompanied by traditional marketing strategies (Cleary, 1999). This is also true for OTAs which are considered native online business as all the OTAs featured in this study also invests in television advertisements in order to drive traffic to their website.

5.2 The characteristics of website content

5.2.1 Color

In concurrence with the results of this research, two earlier studies on website color showed that for users, the four most clearly discernible color schemes included those with dominant blue and gray hues, and that blue was preferred to all other colors. In short, the homepages that obtained the highest scores, whatever the participants’ status were the ones presented in blue. In contrast to users, web designers had a liking for pages presented in gray. The favoring of blue was also in accordance with older research, which showed that blue is often selected as users’ favorite color, regardless of their age and cultural context (Lichtlé, 2007; Meyers-Levy & Peracchio, 1995). Finally, although gray is a neutral color, it may be regarded as an innovative feature by designers, as it is often perceived as trendy. This color is thought to enhance the appearance and layout of information, thereby increasing the accessibility of information structure (Bonnardel, Piolat, & Le Bigot, 2011). On OTAs blue was a popular color of both text and website functions while gray was more frequently utilized as a font color, suggesting that OTA

web designers have thoroughly considered user preferences when choosing web page colors.

Researchers have also proven the effectiveness of colors based on the emotions they induce. Blue had the greatest impact on purchase intention (Hall & Hanna, 2004a) and was the main logo color of four OTAs, and hence was used extensively across the hotel listing page. The dominance of blue is probably owed to its standing as “a peaceful and calming color exuding stability and expertise,” and is said to be a fixture on corporate sites for this reason. It is also said to symbolize trust and dependability (“Color Theory”, 2014). Yellow was associated with satisfaction (Bynum, Epps, & Kaya, 2006) and is commonly used to visualize star rating on OTAs. Green is a visual prime for price (Mandel & Johnson, 2002) as can be seen in its usage on the Travelocity.com “Book Now” button, and is the color of pricing related text on all OTAs.

Web design principles make recommendations for combining colors on a web page, with a high contrast between text and background being of premier importance (Hall & Hanna, 2004b). Kiritani & Shirai (2003) reported that when reading a text written on a white background, users have the feeling that time passes more slowly and lends credence to the use of a somewhat white background on all the OTAs surveyed (cited in Pelet & Papadopoulou, 2012). With this said, it can be determined that the OTAs have done their research regarding colors and combinations that enhance readability and retention, appeal to browsers and influence them to make bookings.

Similarly, Hill and Scharff (1999) found that gray backgrounds with black text ranked high in readability, when study participants were required to search for specific objects within the page and their reaction time recorded (cited in Hall & Hanna, 2004b). This basically means that similar high contrast backgrounds such as Booking.com’s blue on white background and Hotel.com’s dark grey on white background are easy on the eyes of users and are pleasing to read. This is supported by Hall and Hanna (2004b) who found that for educational sites, where retention and readability are important aspects; black text on white background or very similar combinations of text are recommended” (Hall & Hanna, 2004b).

5.2.2 Pictures

Among advertising dimensions, pictures were revealed as one of the most effective communication tools that is capable of projecting desirable visual images and conditions of products and services into the customer’s mind (Jeong & Choi, 2004). It may be for this reason that all the OTAs survey presented the picture slideshow within the first frame of the web page, as the customers interest may not be garnered through plain unattractive content such as text. Some researchers also reported that pictures outperformed text in the function of customers’ recall of the products and services companies offer (Edell & Burke, 1987; Unnava & Burnkrant, 1991). This may explain the quantity of pictures presented in an attempt to capture and hold the browsers attention, as well as the fact that some pictures may display a scene as vague as “a vase on a table”; probably an attempt to stimulate a feeling of nostalgia in potential guests and increase purchase intention.

Results of a recent study indicated that booking decisions are positively related to a website’s aesthetic appeal. The study found that pictures on a hotel website was the most important aspect which persuaded the booking decision and impacted perception of site appeal (Phelan, Christodoulidou, Countryman, & Kistner, 2011). In this light, it was also

observed that pictures were featured elsewhere on the web page under the heading “hotel suggestions” and is certainly an attempt to keep browsers on the OTA in the event that they are not interested in the property they are currently viewing. The size of the main picture on the OTAs ranged from three-quarters of the page frame, to half the page frame in instances where the accompanying pictures were also seen within the first frame. Print advertising research advocates that pictures should be relatively large (Armstrong 2000, p. 6), or larger than half the area of the advertisement (Assael, Kofron, and Burgi 1967), or even to cover two-thirds of the advertising area, or simply “the bigger the picture, the better” (Rossiter and Percy 1997, p. 295) which means it cannot be too large (cited in Pieters & Wedel, 2004). It can therefore be concluded that the OTA pictures are in conformance with the recommendations of research carried out in this area.

5.2.3 Text

In the realm of web browsers, text lettering is known as a font, with each having a special name (Lawrence & Tavakol, 2007). Helvetica and Arial are sans serif fonts, which mean that “the typeface has no serifs (finishing strokes) and is more modern-looking.” Sans serif fonts are more legible on screen than fonts with “frills.” Arial is simply Microsoft’s version of Helvetica (Pipes, 2011), the two fonts used by all the OTAs. Modifying the size of letters can produce strong and pleasant effects that can add immediate meaning to the rest of the content. Typography in various sizes and colors attracts the attention of the users and adds aesthetic value to the page (cited in Lawrence & Tavakol, 2007). For example, Travelocity uses headings of 2 sizes; the first and largest heading usually contains the premier facility offered by the hotel such as a restaurant or spa (see Figure 4.13). Similarly we see that conspicuous text is also used on website functions that are used to capture the reader’s attention such as “free cancellation” written in green.

One study found that “the position of the headings (marginal or embedded) had no effect, but that headings in either form aided the recall, search and retrieval of information” (Hartley & Trueman, 1985). Similarly, in terms of paragraphing and headers, users in the Morrow, Leirer, Andrassy, Hier, and Menard (1998) study displayed a preference for paragraphs with headers to those without cues. They also concluded that hierarchical cues such as category headers may be more likely to improve comprehension of longer texts where hierarchical organization is more important. One can see that this is the case with four of the OTAs featured in the current study (see Figure 4.13 above). It was observed that the OTAs which used multiple headings to denote the content of each paragraph had a more organized look and feel as users could easily locate a particular offering such as in room amenities and quickly decide if the feature they sought was present in the room.

5.2.4 Layout

Users view one web page at a time and so the arrangement of the content is of utmost importance as the aim is to position items in a pleasing way that is easy to find during user interaction. Furthermore, Rosen and Purinton (2004) affirmed that high quality content is one of the primary determinants of repeat visits.” Items should be properly positioned in relation to each other, and to achieve this harmonic effect, a grid is often utilized (Lawrence & Tavakol, 2007). It was common for the OTAs to place the hotel slideshow at the top of the page just below hotel name, address and star rating. Some OTAs peculiarly position the room selection option even before the description, prompting one to wonder what message this sends to prospective guests. There is also evidence that all OTAs utilize

a grid (see Appendix C and Appendix D) with some OTAs dividing the page in thirds while others use halves.

The ways in which elements are positioned on a web page bring harmony to all its contents. The properties of each element such as color, shape, and position can bring about a negative result if not carefully considered; hence the importance of employing user centered thinking in the design process (Lawrence & Tavakol, 2007). The author of this paper commented earlier that the OTAs did not seek to differentiate themselves with the arrangement of their web pages, and in hindsight this may have been prudent on their part as users have come to expect OTA pages to be organized in a particular way, and if an OTA seeks to radically change its layout users may have difficulty locating content. In a similar light, Priceline.com's web page may have very few frames, and may omit key features from the main page; however, to their credit they have placed the picture slide show, hotel description and price within the very first frame; the most important factors for decision-making.

5.2.5 Advertising principles

A study by Luk et al. (1996) to identify the general characteristics of print advertisements on hotel service found techniques such as the use of: a) "concrete description to convey the features/benefits of the service"; b) "pictures to make the features/benefits of the service more easy to understand or appear more attractive"; c) "advertisement pictures which show the facilities/goods that are used to deliver the service"; d) "a picture showing how the service is delivered"; e) "the whole advertisement is emotionally interesting"; and, f) "the language of this advertisement is imagery-provoking." Analysis of the OTA descriptions and a scan of the slideshow pictures indeed concur with this research; however, it was very rare for all the techniques mentioned to be seen in a single description or listing.

A similar study examined the effectiveness of emotional appeals in hotel advertisements directed at potential customers. An emotional message strategy was found to be the most successful in regard to advertising effectiveness. "Advertisements with a high emotional appeal, as decided on by the participants, were highest rated in likeability, service expectations, attitude toward the brand, and future purchase intentions" (Mattila, 2001). While emotional appeal through the use of advertising techniques such as persuasion and emotive description is beneficial, it could be distracting to the user if all these techniques were employed as their excessive use has been shown to reduce information content in the current study.

5.2.5.1 Persuasion

Lewis (1981) opined that the role of hotel marketing executives is to develop the preferred perception of the property's benefits in the customer's mind in relation to those of the competing hotels, bearing in mind that consumers look for tangible clues to differentiate between the benefits of intangible services offered by the competition. The author went on to cite the example of "Soars 46 stories over Central Park"; for a hotel which offered views of the park that were not customary in New York City. This type of technique was also found in the current study; however, as mentioned before, some OTAs used the same phrases across all their descriptions. This could mean that such an appeal could lose its effect if the customer views the same persuasive phrases multiple times.

5.2.6 Word count

The question of “How many words should an advertisement have?” has been one for the ages. Experienced marketers will say “The length of the ad is strictly based upon its purpose. And you should only use enough words to accomplish that purpose. Not a word more or less” (Stoddard, 2010). In simpler words, there is no magic number. In terms of word count across the OTAs’ descriptions, the average for 1 and 2 star hotels was 107 words, 139 for 3 star and 167 for 4 star; suggesting a positive relationship with an increase in star rating. Travelocity had the highest word count average across OTAs, with 4-star hotels tending to have lengthier descriptions as they offer more amenities and services. Likewise, the use of persuasion was connected to an increase in word count.

5.3 Common themes in hotel information

5.3.1 Amenities and facilities

In reinforcement of the results of this research which found Internet access to be the most popular amenity overall and television to be the second vital in room amenity, a study which investigated consumer preferences for guestroom technologies found that in-room electronics like Internet access and flat screen televisions were important in hotel decision-making (Beldona & Cobanoglu, 2007). Similarly, Bulchand-Gidumal et al. (2011) posited that the inclusion of free wi-fi improved hotel ratings, nevertheless, 100% of the hotels surveyed in the current study offered wi-fi and as such it is becoming clear that in just a few years hotel customers have ceased to consider wi-fi a perk and now see it as a basic necessity. A 2014 online traveler survey also concurred that Internet/free wi-fi was the number one amenity demanded, with complimentary breakfast and restaurant taking the second and third spots (Hotels.com, 2014c). In parallel, results of the current study found complimentary wireless Internet to be a top amenity among 3 star hotels with restaurants being popular in both 3 and 4 star hotels.

Though free wi-fi and other complimentary amenities have been shown to be a decisive factor in hotel selection (Bilgihan, 2012), an AH&LA (2010) study of over 7000 hotels in the United States pointed out that luxury (84%) and upper upscale (76%) hotels are more likely to charge for Internet access in room. The results of the current study are in agreement with this finding, as the instances wherein Internet was provided for a surcharge were for 4 star hotels. The AH&LA (2012) study also found that the availability of wireless Internet access is on the increase with a 4% increase to 93% in 2010 from 2006. The current study found Internet access to be offered by all hotels. This may have been motivated by the fact that within the last few years, competing hotels in a destination offered the amenity, and so all hoteliers were compelled to follow the trend so as not to be disadvantaged. In the AH&LA (2012) study, 89% provided wireless in-room Internet access and 79% offered complimentary breakfast, with mid range hotels most likely to do so. The current study found similar numbers for free wi-fi, and complimentary breakfast at 73%, with three instances of 4 star hotels charging for the service.

Shanka and Taylor (2004) set out to determine which attributes guests of 3-star hotels perceived as important, that is, to determine the importance level of the nominated attributes. The results of this study showed that, of the 18 factors tested, the highest ranked amenities were restaurant/bar, onsite parking, 24 hour reception, taxi booking and in-room safe. It was observed that Internet connection was ranked 11th, however, later studies (e.g. Bulchand-Gidumal et al., 2011) registered a phenomenal increase in the importance of this

amenity. Offerings by 3 star hotels in common with the current study include restaurant/bar and onsite parking, with wi-fi ranked number 1 in stark contrast.

Although bar/café was ranked 12th and swimming pool 18th out of 22 offerings by participants in a study conducted by Otegbulu and Tenigbade (2011), a study by Bauer, Jago, and Wise (1993) found that 93% and 73% of guests respectively, used these facilities. This strengthens the theory that guests now expect certain basic amenities to be provided and as such their perceived importance may decrease. Nevertheless, OTAs and hoteliers should not take their inclusion for granted as potential guests may wonder if the amenity is not provided, especially in the case of lower rated hotels. In support of this theory, Shergill and Sun (2004) investigated the requirements of leisure travelers as it related to overall hotel service, hotel facilities and room facilities. The factors were grouped into basic requirements, convenience and personal requirements. Of 20 factors for room facilities; bathroom amenities, hair dryer and telephone were ranked 4th, 6th and 9th respectively and were considered basic requirements. This may explain why these amenities are not usually mentioned by 4 star hotels. In a similar light, Bulchand-Gidumal et al. (2011) declared business centers and room service to be irrelevant in customers minds; however, the inclusion of such services enhance the perception of a hotels overall offerings and should therefore not be neglected.

Food and beverage is said to be one of the quickest growing revenue departments in full service hotels (Adler & Chienm, 2004). Mccleary, Weaver, and Hutchinson (1993) found that restaurant facilities were not important in the selection of a hotel, arguing that there are often adequate dining choices in close proximity. On the contrary, other authors opined that, “while the existence of food and beverage and recreational facilities may not have a high impact on customer satisfaction, the absence of such facilities will perturb customers (Chu & Choi, 2000). Food and beverage facilities in the current study included restaurants, bars, lounges, poolside bars, coffee shop/café, pastry shops, snack shops and vending machines, with varying levels of popularity. Although scholars have posited that their existence is not pertinent it was found that the OTAs were keen in mentioning these facilities in hotel descriptions, with 86% featuring restaurants and 90% featuring bars. Perhaps guests use the quantity of offerings as an indicator of the level of service provided by the hotel and although they may not use certain facilities or amenities they may feel secure knowing that they are available. In regard to the promotion of hotel services, Adler and Chienm (2004) revealed that the events business can be a lucrative market for the hotel food and beverage revenues; as this low cost high return business has become an emphasis area in food and beverage operations.

5.3.2 Surrounding information

Iso (1983) posited that “travel provides opportunities to partake in variety-seeking behaviors while escaping routine environments, and that travelers participate in activities that they do not usually engage in at home to satisfy their psychological need for escape and pleasure seeking” (cited in Smith, Pitts, & Litvin, 2012). In this regard, Beldona et al. (2005) indicated that lodging managers should improve information about the property and its surroundings by providing details such as the proximity to shopping centers and surrounding attractions. Nevertheless, Shergill and Sun (2004) found that shopping and entertainment venues were considered convenience factors and were not basic requirements, which suggests that some guests book hotels based on their proximity to attractions; not book a hotel then discover nearby attractions. This idea lends relevance to the OTA destination map feature which allows users to view the hotels in the results lists

in relation to the location of key attractions and services. In the current study there was no deficiency in the provision of this kind of information as each description listed six to nine attractions, amenities and activities, which included museums, monuments, golf courses and conference centers. As it relates to activities organized off-site, tours were the most patronized on a list which included sports as well as water sports (Bauer et al., 1993). In the descriptions it was seen wherein hotels offered concierge or tour/ticket assistance, and even discounts for activities. Ljubljana hotels were likely to offer shuttles; and it can be reasoned that in destinations where such services appear to be the norm, guests may be motivated to choose based on the availability of these value added offerings.

Hotel location is an essential factor that influences tourists' hotel selection decisions, and studies have affirmed that the key source of competitive advantage in the lodging industry is a convenient location (Dubé & Renaghan, 2000; Lockyer, 2005). This was also confirmed by Otegbulu and Tenigbade (2011) whose study placed location in third place, with only "regular water supply," and "constant power supply" ranked higher. Also in the top five was "location close to airport." In the analysis of the descriptions it was common for OTAs to list iconic attractions even if the hotel was not located in close proximity to it. Similarly, even hotels that are located some distance from airports or train stations will state that they are "only 10 km away." This tactic may be explained by the Shoval et al. (2011) study which tracked the movements of hundreds of tourists in Hong Kong. They found that "iconic attractions and iconic tourism nodes (for example "old towns") seem to have the ability to draw tourists regardless of the hotel location. However, tourist visits to less important nodes in the city was strongly influenced by the location of their hotel. Rivers, Toh, and Alaoui (1991) examined the hotel selection decisions of members and non-members of frequent guest programs, and showed that convenience of location and overall service received the highest ratings. With the results of the aforementioned study in mind it can be understood why the headings of OTA in the study may say "Ljubljana hotel close to Triple Bridge" or why some OTAs use 2 consecutive sentences to mention attractions, or may even list them in both the first and last paragraphs of the description. These tactics ensure that hotels are sold based on their convenient location, especially if they do not have high review scores or are high priced.

5.4 Are OTAs presenting consistent textual information?

5.4.1 Star rating

A survey carried out by consulting firm, Harris (cited in Guillet & Law, 2010), confirmed that the property star rating is among the most important factors in customers' minds in selecting one hotel over the other, and revealed that online agencies often applied their own star rating systems. In the current study, the hotel star rating was prominently featured within the first frame of each OTA listing. Analysis showed that there were grave discrepancies in hotel star rating among OTAs. This finding is not new, as a previous study showed that hotel star rating often varied by one star or higher depending on the travel search engine used. The results of the study stated that only 24% of the 169 hotels sampled had a consistent star rating across the various online channels (Guillet & Law, 2010).

Jeong et al. (2003) carried out an electronic survey of 1,743 Internet shoppers and hotel customers, and found that information satisfaction was strongly related to behavioral intentions on the web. In regard to information satisfaction, it could indeed become problematic if a customer reserves a hotel listed as 5 stars on an OTA, only to arrive and

realize that the sign outside the hotels is engraved with 4 stars. Israeli (2002) suggested that the majority of variations in room prices can be attributed to a hotel's star rating, and opined that a high star rating is an advantage which supports the existence of a price premium. Continuing on the example of the customer, matters could become even more complicated if the price the customer paid for the hotel was above their personal price range for a 4 star property. Hence it is important that OTAs refrain from using their own star rating scheme and allow the hotelier to make the decision; hopefully a consistent one. In support of the price argument, Jang, Prasad, and Ratchford (2012) investigated "How consumers use product reviews in the purchase decision process" and found that a unit increase in the mean of product reviews is worth USD\$45 (or about 33€) on average. Their findings also showed that the number of product reviews is irrelevant; however, they stated that the variance between reviews can impact monetary value in a positive or negative way based on the difference between the review average and the quality earlier perceived by the customer.

5.4.2 Information content

Vrana et al. (2004) measured the amount and type of information provided on hotel websites and discovered that higher rated and chain hotels were more active in offering information services. They found that there was a positive correlation between the importance customers attached to website quality and the star rating of the hotel, with 4 and 5 star hotels expected to excel in information provision (cited in Musante et al., 2009). On the contrary, if these findings are applied to OTAs, one may argue that lower rated hotels are providing as much information as higher rated hotels; but because they have less offerings they will of course have less information. Nevertheless, if an OTA neglects to mention that rooms are equipped with televisions, the user may assume that none is present, or it is possible that "these amenities have reached their maturity level in the hotel product offering cycle" or "have become an integral part of hotels and so they are overlooked by travelers, but they still expect them to be available" (Berezina & Cobanoglu, 2010). This was observed in the consistency analysis wherein the television was mentioned by one OTA but was overlooked by the other; possibly because it was assumed that a hotel room in a modern city must contain a TV set. Nevertheless, if it is advertised that one hotel in a certain area has meeting facilities, but the same OTA neglects to mention that the hotel across the street has space as well, it is likely that even non-business travelers could take this into account when making a decision. This argument is supported by one study which found that the availability of meeting space has a positive impact on room bookings (Boo & Kim, 2010).

5.4.3 Guest reviews

Customer comment cards have now been relegated to antiquity, with online guest reviews broadcasting the joys or misery of the customer experience into the public domain. A rating system in numerical form has become a staple feature on travel related websites (Chen, 2008). These scores are tabulated from reviews which are posted daily on third party booking sites as well as travel forums and social network pages (Kovacs, 2008). Researchers (van Schaik & Ling, 2009) stated that in situations such as online booking where the customer is in a goal oriented mode, an easy information processing tool such as review score is appreciated. This score was present for all the OTAs surveyed and was also shown to be a basic factor for OTA websites. Related studies show that customers often depend on this summarized form of information, which may be more influential to purchase decisions than less aggregated information. It is said to be useful to customers

faced with a large volume of information, and that ratings are influential in product choice (Chen, 2008) and present customers with a quick way to assess an offering (Tsang & Prendergast, 2009). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that hotels with higher online star ratings receive more online bookings (Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009) (cited in Sparks & Browning, 2011). Notwithstanding, the OTAs surveyed provided positive review snapshots for all the hotels, so even those with a somewhat lesser rating have the chance to be perceived in a positive light.

Aral (2014), opined that decision-making in the modern era, has become heavily dependent on the digitized and aggregated opinions of the masses. The author went on to say that when others are satisfied with the hospitality services received and reward the entity with a positive rating, this influences us to feel the same and likewise assign a similarly positive rating. It can therefore be assumed in the opposite way, that if a hotel has received a handful of negative reviews such as that observed in the current study, it could affect the perception of potential customers and therefore lower purchase intention. In this light, Aral and Walker (2012) wrote that online ratings are one of the most trusted sources of consumer confidence in e-commerce decisions, but stated that the results of research implies that they are prone to customer bias and can easily be manipulated. This stipulation is supported by Mauri and Minazzi (2013) who found a positive correlation between both hotel purchasing intention, expectations of the customers and the valence (positivity or negativity) of the review.

5.4.4 Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been formulated to give a fitting end to this study. It was alarming that both the OTAs and hoteliers seem to be oblivious to the concept and importance of incremental revenue. It is therefore advised to list offerings such as business services because even leisure travelers sometimes use these facilities, for example, to host a birthday party, wedding reception, and studies found this to have a positive impact on incremental revenue (Adler & Chienm, 2004). OTAs sometime have a handful of guest reviews (typical of newly listed or new hotels) with a low aggregated score; and this is a deterrent to the modern guests who are easily swayed by ‘herding instincts’ (Aral, 2014). It is recommended that the OTAs refrain from posting a review score until the hotel has accumulated at least five reviews, however, the reviews should still be made available to prospective guests.

There are a few specific recommendations. Priceline.com could improve the content of the hotel listing page, to feature the location map and ‘room type, price and availability’, instead of providing links. Expedia.com and Travelocity.com should modify their slideshow to ensure that the pictures fill the entire frame of the slideshow, as well; the pixel density could also be improved to prevent fuzziness on large displays. Booking.com and Priceline.com could add headings to their descriptions to better organize the content. OTAs on average featured between 42 and 55% of the total information available for a hotel. Booking.com, Expedia.com and Priceline.com could increase their information content, and ensure that key information is present before publishing. The collected data that is used to personalize the online experience may result in privacy issues on a shared computer and so a simple pop up box should confirm the user’s agreement.

In terms of information content across OTAs, it is acknowledged that each description should be unique and persuasive; however, this should not be done at the expense of omitting key information. As such, the researcher took the liberty to use the findings

afforded by this study to create a brief guide to assist hoteliers in considering all the relevant dimensions of their product offerings when formulating and submitting their hotel description information to OTAs. The information featured in the one-page guide is presented in a concise yet unstructured manner which allows room for the hotelier to add their personal touch and creativity, and easily adapt to the style of each OTA.

THE 5-MINUTE HOTEL DESCRIPTION GUIDE FOR HOTELIERS

Give consideration to each dimension of your hotel offering, keeping in mind the examples shown, while limiting the use of rhetorical techniques two instances of each type, and following the layout of the OTA.

Room

Bathroom

Toiletries
Hair dryer
Shower or tub

Room furnishings

Blackout drapes
Type of mattress
Television (specs)

Room amenities

Telephone
Iron/ironing board
Int'l power sockets

Room setup

All ocean view
Private balcony
Separate sitting area

Offerings

Pillow menu
Turn down service

Amenities by request

Crib
Sofa-bed
Hypo-allergenic bedding

Descriptive words Kid/Eco/Business friendly, tastefully decorated rooms...

Persuasion Order a refreshing drink while you relax at our trendy terrace bar. Take in the spectacular mountain views from your spacious private balcony.

Food and Beverage

Outlets

Snack shop
Coffee shop/café
Vending machines

Cuisine

Danish
International

Sittings

Sunday brunch
Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Special dietary offerings

Kid's menu
Vegetarian menu
Gluten free menu

Offerings

Catering
Room service
Wine selection
Celebratory packages

Value added offers

Table side cooking
Organic ingredients
Locally sourced food

Leisure

Spa
Gym
Wi-Fi
Games room
Terrace/garden

Offerings

Bicycle rental
Barbecue area

Nearby

Attractions
Iconic sites (distance to)

Transport

Transfers
Bus stops nearby
Limo/town car service
Routes (highways etc.)

Walking distance

Shopping district
Convention centers

By vehicle

Airport
Bus station
Train station

Special Information

Parking
Pets welcomed
Disabled access
Wedding services

Complimentary items

Breakfast
Newspapers

Partnerships/Discounts

Tour/transport providers

Services

Concierge
Wake up calls
Currency exchange
Express check-in/out

Business services

Meeting rooms
Business centre
Conference centre

Special conditions

Surcharge
Seasonality
Opening hours
Subject to change
Limited availability

Special qualities

Wired internet
Buffet breakfast
24-hr room service
Non-smoking rooms
Direct dial telephone



Photo source: static.squarespace.com

CONCLUSION

The website dimensions analysis framework of Chung and Law (2003) was applied in the study and revealed the existence of 70 website features; 27 of which were present on all OTAs. The features were categorized under: a) facilities information; b) contact information; c) reservation/prices information; d) surrounding area information; e) management of the website; and, f) company profile. Two new categories were created by the author in a bid to answer the research question: a) personalization; and, b) value enhancement; with the latter containing the most features. Nine “basic factors” otherwise known as website features were identified: a) Hotel name, address and star rating; b) Search box; c) Picture slideshow; d) Hotel description; e) Map of hotel location; f) Room prices, types and availability; g) Guest reviews; h) Hotel facilities; i) Hotel policies; and, j) Suggested hotels. The content analysis revealed that the common themes across the hotel description genre were: Hotel Information a) Bathroom; b) Business; c) Food and Beverage (F&B); d) Leisure; e) Room; and, f) Special Information. Locale Information: g) Attractions, Amenities and Activities’ (AAA); and, h) Transportation.

Consistency proved to be the sore point among the OTAs; ranging from the alarming disparity among star ratings, to guest review ratings, to review format within the same OTA, and hotel information. As a result of the OTAs utilizing different star rating systems (Guillet & Law, 2010) it was discovered that the hotel ratings were consistent across OTAs 70% of the time with variations by up to 2 points. Guest expectations weigh heavily on star rating (Guillet & Law, 2010), and in order to avoid dissatisfaction, OTAs should refrain from administering their own star ratings. In terms of congruence in the description formatting, Hotels.com and Travelocity.com were the most consistent players utilizing a set number of paragraphs and having an established order for listing information.

The OTAs on a whole did a less than desirable job in the provision of information. Prior research cited a lack of information about hotel facilities as the main cause of dissatisfaction during the hotel booking process (Mason & Roberts, 2004). In accordance with these results, it was discovered that there were differences between the popularity of amenities among hotels of different ratings, probably owing to the fact that lower rated hotels do not possess some luxury amenities, and, the propensity of higher rated hotels to assume that prospective clients do not need to be informed of basic amenities. And to magnify this type of failure, it was observed that often times only one OTA made mention of a particular offering. The potency of hotel perks such as complimentary buffet breakfast, free parking or free coffee and tea in the lobby should never be downplayed.

During the study of the descriptions, more surprising findings arose. While the use of advertising techniques such as emotive words and persuasion are shown to enhance readability (Lewis, 1981), the analysis showed that excessive use significantly decreased the information content of the hotel description; a negative correlation. When travelers search for hotels online they tend to skim information (Aral & Walker, 2012), and if the hotel description which serves as a synopsis of the hotel offering is void of pertinent information, browsers could simply move on to the next hotel in the results listing. These techniques should therefore not be employed at the expense of imparting information which could be the decisive element in a choice situation. Furthermore, studies have shown that main ideas are generally processed longer and recalled better than elaborative information (Goldman et al., 1995).

The top three hotel and room amenities ranked based on the number of hotels for which they are mentioned were Internet/wi-fi, onsite restaurant and free parking; concurring with the results of recent studies (Hotels.com, 2014c; Otegbulu & Tenigbade, 2011). The most popular amenities across the hotel information categories were toiletries (bathroom), restaurant (F&B), free wi-fi (leisure), free wi-fi (room) and free parking (special information). Room amenities and attractions information were the only information categories that were featured in 100% of the sources examined, with 4 star hotels more likely to inform browsers about mundane categories such as bathroom. Aside from frequently mentioned service and amenities, there were buzzwords such as center/heart (as in city centre) and similar ones like nearby and close which had the effect of placing even the most distant hotels in close proximity to iconic attractions. Other catchwords were complimentary, include and free, often associated with wi-fi, parking, breakfast and toiletries. This verifies that OTAs believe guests place emphasis on location and nearby attractions, as well as on complimentary services or amenities which enhance the perception of “value for money,” and thereby increase the rate of bookings.

Booking.com seemed to give hoteliers the most freedom; only requiring that the information be paraphrased, while Priceline did not segment its information. Booking.com and Priceline.com occasionally employed persuasion and emotive description, and were most likely to mention transportation and the largest variety of attractions, but Travelocity.com was consistent in utilizing persuasive phrases. Travelocity.com and Hotels.com were six and four times more likely to mention business services than the other OTAs, while Travelocity.com was five times as likely to mention room service and bathroom details.

Each OTA had its merits, and the majority of OTA content was found to be in accordance with the results of scholarly research. There was evidence that Hotels.com and Travelocity.com utilize some form of rubric in formulating descriptions; supported by the presence of common phrases across all their descriptions, and the consistent mention of offerings that were overlooked by other agencies. Booking.com and Priceline.com were found to feature similar descriptions 90% of the times. Expedia.com was most consistent regarding word count, with 86% of its descriptions between 70 and 90 words. Expedia.com and Hotels.com are the most consistent in terms of paragraphing as a result of the compulsory headings which denote the information that follows. This format would suit all online travel agencies as headings encourage the recall, search and retrieval of information (Hartley & Trueman, 1985). Overall, Hotels.com and Travelocity.com were the champions in information provision, possibly a byproduct of the higher than average word count of their descriptions.

The role of OTAs as a source of hotel and destination information cannot be underestimated. Hotel descriptions indicate the most popular attractions, with an average of six to nine per hotel, and 35 for a destination. Similarly, they indicate the most convenient modes of transportation to reach the hotel, and even proximity to other regional destinations of higher acclaim. Aside from the locale information in the description, the lower portion of the hotel listing page often has links to destination guides and the attractions themselves. This signals that the OTAs are in fact taking on the role that guidebooks were celebrated for, and it is highly likely that this could lead to the demise of this seemingly archaic travel aid. By simply browsing the OTA, travelers can create expectations and develop biases by unconsciously observing the recurrence of particular attractions or service offerings in a destination. One could also make

assumptions about the level of development of a destination, or how important tourism is by examining the hotels and the distribution of their star rating.

Hotels are adhering to the established principles of web design; utilizing colors meaningfully (Bonnardel et al., 2011), employing common design elements to enhance usability (Lawrence & Tavakol, 2007), and formatting text to improve readability (Hartley & Trueman, 1985). Even though the study found that OTAs' hotel listing pages predominantly consist of blue and gray, and seem to lack creativity in design, these choices are supported by research (Lichtlé, 2007), one of which states that blue has the greatest impact on purchase intention (Hall & Hanna, 2004b). In terms of website elements, some ingenious features were discovered, such as those which provide hotel suggestions, ask for customer feedback, give snapshots of guest reviews, signal the limited availability of room stock or promotions, and allow the user to customize the experience by saving hotels to a list. Nevertheless, these were observed across all the OTAs studied. It seems safe to say, that once a creative website element has debuted, it is quickly adopted by a company's competitors, and is no longer considered innovative. Still, Chen (2011) declares that the growing competition arising from burgeoning global markets exacerbates the demand for hotels to innovate their services and processes to continuously ensure success.

Concerning the variables of the study, there were no differences between the hotel descriptions of independent and affiliated hotels, or city centre hotels and suburban hotels. Neither was there a correlation between the country and the characteristics of the description. However, there were differences among 1 and 2 star, 3 star, and 4 star hotels in terms of information content. The most consistent correlation was the propensity of 4 star hotels to have longer descriptions, and consequently more informational content (Vrana et al., 2004), and premium amenities and facilities such as spas, gyms and business centers. The OTA to which the hotel description belonged was the primary determinant of its characteristics.

Limitations

The primary limitation of the content analysis is that the hotel description was the only textual content analyzed; however, hotel information is also present under headings such as hotel facilities, hotel amenities and hotel policies. Another restriction which could affect the accuracy of generalizations made by the study's results is the fact that the hotel star grouping was disproportionate, being dominated by 3 star hotels. This was unavoidable, as the hotel market in the destinations studied were home to very few 1 and 2 star hotels that were listed on all five OTAs. Lastly, from the onset the study was intended to be a general assessment of the hotel listing page, and as such did not go into detail regarding all the dimensions examined, for example website color scheme.

Future research

Future research could evaluate the entire text content of the hotel listing pages of a larger sample of OTAs to draw a more definitive conclusion regarding information consistency and comprehensiveness. Specific areas could also be targeted, such as the disparity among the guest review ratings amongst a wider cross section of online agencies. Studies could also employ the human element, and mobilize focus groups to appraise the usability of OTA hotel listing pages on a whole, or center on deciding which OTAs present

information in the most reader friendly way, encompassing aspects such as font and text color, paragraph arrangement, and advertising techniques, among other dimensions.

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APPENDICES

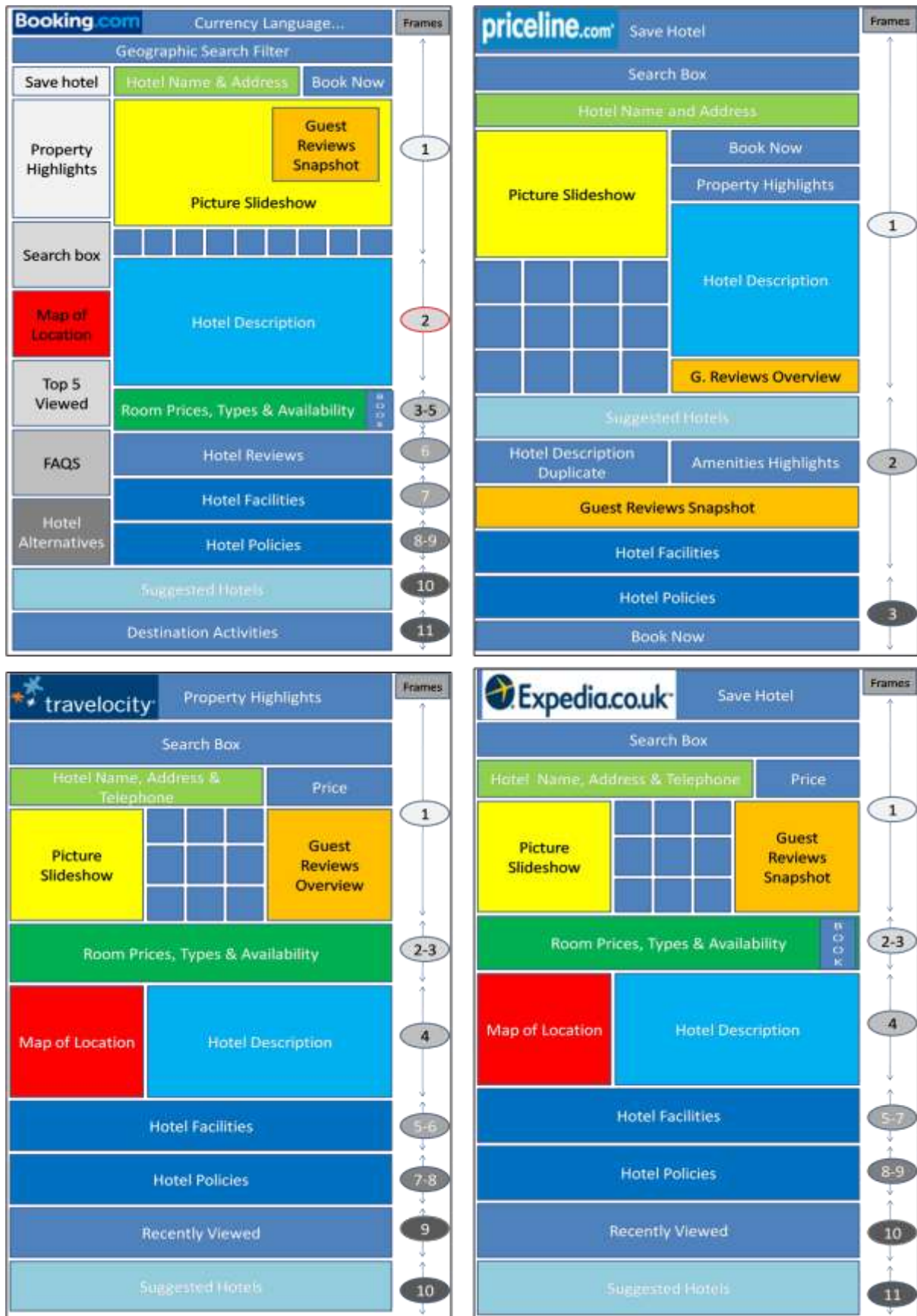
Appendix A. Table showing website elements by dimension (part 1)

Website Elements by Dimension	OTA				
	Booking	Expedia	Priceline	Hotels	Travelocity
Company Profile					
About OTA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Legal information		✓	✓		
Logo	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
OTA copyright information	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
OTA membership information		✓		✓	
Other OTA services	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Partner organizations		✓	✓		✓
Contact Information					
Contact OTA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
FAQs	✓		✓	✓	
Feedback	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hotel address	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hotel name	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hotel telephone	✓	✓		✓	✓
OTA booking centre telephone		✓		✓	✓
Report incorrect information		✓		✓	✓
Facilities Information					
Hotel description	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hotel facilities & amenities	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hotel policies & fees	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Main property photo – large	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Other property photos – small	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Special property information	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Star rating	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Personalization					
Currency	✓		✓	✓	
Existing lists	✓	✓	✓		
Language	✓			✓	
Localized sites	✓	✓			✓
Manage existing bookings	✓	✓	✓		
Save to a list	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sign in to account	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reservation/price information					
Book now button	✓			✓	
Booking button	✓	✓		✓	✓
Check date availability	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Room type filter		✓			✓

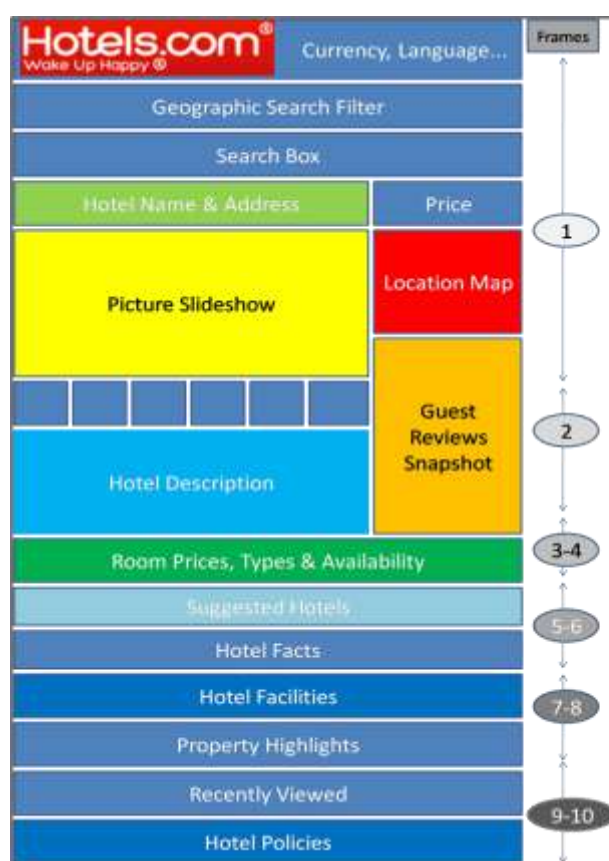
Appendix B. Table showing website elements by dimension (part 2)

Website Elements by Dimension	OTA				
	Booking	Expedia	Priceline	Hotels	Travelocity
Room type information	✓	✓		✓	✓
Room type selection	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
User reference id	✓				
Surrounding area information					
Destination activities etc.	✓				
Hotel alternatives	✓				
Hotels in geographic area	✓	✓	✓		
Suggested hotels	✓	✓	✓		✓
Value enhancement					
All guest reviews	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bookings made in x period		✓		✓	✓
Customers also viewed	✓				
Email hotel info to a friend				✓	
Free cancellation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Guest review snapshot	✓		✓	✓	✓
Guest reviews overview	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Most recent booking for hotel	✓	✓			
Location map	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
OTA mobile app	✓		✓		
OTA rewards		✓			
Other destinations	✓	✓		✓	
Other destinations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Other persons viewing hotel	✓	✓			✓
Other property types	✓				
Preferred property	✓				
Price change notification			✓		
Price guarantee	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Recently viewed hotels	✓	✓			✓
Rooms left	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social media links	✓		✓	✓	
Subscribe to OTA	✓				
Suggest booking out of peak periods	✓				
Top five viewed hotels	✓				
Travel guides				✓	
Value deal	✓				✓
Website management					
Back to top	✓				
Guest reviews menu	✓				
Page menu	✓				
Search box	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Appendix C. OTA hotel listing page arrangement (part 1)



Appendix D. OTA hotel listing page arrangement (part 2)



Appendix E. A sample of the descriptions across the various OTAs for a 3 star hotel

OTA	Hotel: City Hotel
B O O K I N G	<p>There's a fine line between time to work, visiting our capital's attractions and time to rest. Here, at City Hotel Ljubljana, we help you cross it with ease.</p> <p>Recently refurbished rooms await you, to relax and gather your strength after a hard day. You'll find our business facilities ideal for hard negotiations, crucial presentations and also for social gatherings, or simply meeting with your friends.</p> <p>There are 202 rooms with 415 beds available to our guests, right next to Ljubljana's Old Town.</p> <p>We speak your language! Hotel Rooms: 202</p>
E X P E D I A	<p>Hotel in Ljubljana near Dragon Bridge</p> <p>Location</p> <p>Located in the heart of Ljubljana, this hotel is within walking distance of Dragon Bridge, Triple Bridge, and St. Nicholas Cathedral. Also nearby are Ljubljana Castle and Franciscan Church of the Annunciation.</p> <p>Hotel Features</p> <p>In addition to a restaurant, City Hotel features complimentary bicycles. Other amenities include a bar/lounge and a coffee shop/café.</p> <p>Room Amenities</p> <p>Televisions come with cable channels. Guestrooms also feature complimentary wireless Internet access, safes, and desks.</p>
H O T E L S	<p>Location.</p> <p>Situated in the heart of Ljubljana, City Hotel is within walking distance of Dragon Bridge, Triple Bridge, and St. Nicholas Cathedral. Also nearby are Ljubljana Castle and Franciscan Church of the Annunciation.</p> <p>Hotel Features.</p> <p>This business-friendly hotel offers a restaurant, a coffee shop/café, and a bar/lounge. A complimentary breakfast is served each morning. Complimentary wireless and wired high-speed Internet access is available in public areas and a computer station is located on site. Business amenities at this 3-star property include a business center and small meeting rooms. Additional amenities include a terrace, a library, and multilingual staff. Onsite parking is offered for a surcharge. This is a smoke-free property.</p> <p>Guestrooms.</p> <p>The 204 guestrooms at City Hotel include safes and hair dryers. Guests can use the in-room complimentary wireless high-speed Internet access. Televisions are equipped with cable channels. All accommodations provide desks and direct-dial phones. In addition, housekeeping is offered daily and amenities available on request include irons/ironing boards.</p>
P R I C E L I N E	<p>Hotel Features</p> <p>There's a fine line between time to work, visiting our capital's attractions and time to rest. Here, at City Hotel Ljubljana, we help you cross it with ease. Recently refurbished rooms await you, to relax and rejuvenate after a hard day. You'll find our business facilities ideal for negotiations, presentations and also for social gatherings, or simply meeting with your friends. There are 202 rooms with 415 beds available to our guests, right next to Ljubljana's Old Town.</p>

OTA	Hotel: City Hotel
T	<p>Hotel in Ljubljana near Dragon Bridge A stay at City Hotel places you in the heart of Ljubljana, walking distance from Dragon Bridge and Franciscan Church of the Annunciation. This hotel is within close proximity of Preseren Square and Triple Bridge.</p>
R	<p>Make yourself at home in one of the 204 guestrooms. Complimentary wireless Internet access keeps you connected, and cable programming is available for your entertainment.</p>
A	<p>Bathrooms have bathtubs or showers and hair dryers. Conveniences include direct-dial</p>
V	<p>phones, as well as safes and desks. Enjoy recreation amenities such as bicycles to rent or</p>
E	<p>take in the view from a terrace. Additional amenities include complimentary wireless</p>
L	<p>Internet access, gift shops/newsstands, and a television in the lobby. Satisfy your appetite</p>
O	<p>at the hotel's restaurant, which features a bar and a garden view. Dining is also available</p>
C	<p>at a coffee shop/café. Quench your thirst with your favorite drink at a bar/lounge. For</p>
I	<p>your convenience, a complimentary breakfast is served daily.</p>
T	<p>Featured amenities include complimentary high-speed (wired) Internet access, a business</p>
Y	<p>center, and a computer station.</p>
	<p>Planning an event in Ljubljana? This hotel has 1786 square feet (166 square meters) of space consisting of a conference center, conference/meeting rooms, and small meeting rooms. Parking (subject to charges) is available onsite.</p>

***Continued on following page with the description's information statistics.**

Appendix F. Table of the number of Information units across OTAs for a sample hotel

City Hotel - Ljubljana - 3 stars						
Information Category	Info Items	OTA				
		B*	E*	P*	H*	T*
Advertising Techniques	Emotive Description	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
	Persuasion	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Bathroom	Shower/tub					✓
Business	Meeting room	✓		✓	✓	✓
	Business centre				✓	
	Conference room					✓
F&B	Breakfast free				✓	✓
	Bar		✓		✓	✓
	Coffee shop/Café		✓		✓	✓
	Restaurant		✓		✓	✓
	Lounge		✓		✓	✓
Leisure	Terrace				✓	✓
	Wi-Fi				✓	✓
	Bicycle free					✓
	Computer station				✓	✓
	Library				✓	
	Gift shop					✓
	Lobby TV					✓
Rooms	Wi-Fi		✓		✓	✓
	202/204	✓		✓	✓	✓
	415 beds	✓		✓		
	TV		✓		✓	
	Cable channels		✓		✓	✓
	Safe		✓		✓	✓
	Desk		✓		✓	✓
	Phone				✓	✓
Special Info	Refurbished recently	✓		✓		
	Hair dryer				✓	✓
	Iron/ironing board				✓	
	3 star				✓	
	Parking surcharge				✓	✓
	Smoke free				✓	
	Multilingual staff				✓	
AAA	City centre		✓		✓	✓
	Old Town	✓		✓		
	Dragon Bridge		✓		✓	✓
	Triple Bridge				✓	✓
	St. Nicholas Cathedral		✓		✓	
	Ljubljana Castle		✓		✓	
	Franciscan Church		✓		✓	✓
	Preseren Square					✓
Transportation	Train					
Total Info Pieces	38	5	14	5	30	27

Key ✗ - No ✓ - Yes

B - Booking.com; E - Expedia.com; P - Priceline.com; H - Hotels.com; T - Travelocity.com

Appendix G. Sample Hotels.com description

Location.

Situated in the heart of **Ljubljana**, Best Western Premier Hotel Slon is within walking distance of **Franciscan Church of the Annunciation**, **Triple Bridge**, and **St. Nicholas Cathedral**. Also nearby are **Dragon Bridge** and **Ljubljana Castle**.

Hotel Features.

Best Western Premier Hotel Slon has a steam room, a sauna, and a 24-hour fitness center. Complimentary wireless and wired high-speed Internet access is available in public areas. This 4-star hotel features business amenities including a business center, small meeting rooms, and limo/town car service. This Ljubljana hotel offers a coffee shop/café and a bar/lounge. A complimentary breakfast is available. The staff can provide concierge services, tour/ticket assistance, and wedding services. Additional amenities include multilingual staff, ski storage, and laundry facilities. For a surcharge, guests receive transportation including a roundtrip airport shuttle at scheduled times and a train station pick-up service. Guest parking is available for a surcharge.

Guestrooms.

The 168 air-conditioned guestrooms at Best Western Premier Hotel Slon include laptop-compatible safes and minibars. Beds have Egyptian cotton sheets and premium bedding. Pillow menus are available. Guests can use the in-room complimentary wireless and wired high-speed Internet access. Rooms are equipped with LCD TVs with premium digital channels and pay movies. All accommodations provide desks, complimentary newspapers, and direct-dial phones. Bathrooms offer shower/tub combinations, bathrobes, designer toiletries, and hair dryers. All units feature refrigerators and coffee/tea makers. Additional amenities include slippers and irons/ironing boards. In addition, a turndown service is offered nightly, housekeeping is available daily, and amenities available on request include hypo-allergenic bedding.

Appendix H. Table showing the information units featured for the categories F&B, Leisure and Rooms

Information Category			
F&B	Leisure	Rooms	Rooms cont'd
Bar	Air hockey	AC	Sitting area
Bar poolside	Barbecue area	Balcony	Slippers
Breakfast	Barbecue grill	Balcony/patio	Sofa bed
Breakfast buffet	Benches	Blackout drapes	Stovetop
Breakfast free	Body treatments	Cable channels	TV
Breakfast paid	Bowling alley	CD player	TV flat panel
Breakfast surcharge	Bicycle rental	Climate control	TV flat screen
Coffee shop/cafe	Coffee/tea free in lobby	Coffee/tea maker	TV LCD
Coffee/tea free	Croquet court	Coffeemaker	TV Plasma
Danish cuisine	Evening social free	Desk	TV smart
Dinner	Facials	Digital channels	Utensils
Gluten free menu	Free newspapers	Dishwasher	Wi-Fi
Gourmet cuisine	Games room	Down comforters	
Int'l cuisine	Garden	Electric kettle	
Kid-friendly	Gym 24 hr	Hair dryer	
Lactose free menu	Hot tub	Hypo-allergenic bedding	
Lounge	Library	Int'l channels	
Lunch	Lobby TV	iPod docking stations	
Mediterranean cuisine	Massage treatments	Iron/ironing board	
Packed lunch surcharge	Mini golf	Kitchen	
Pastry shop	Newspapers free	Kitchenette	
Restaurant	Notebook rental	Local calls free	
Room service 24 hr	Outdoor Chess	Luxury bedding	
Room service limited	Petanque	Microwave	
Slovene cuisine	Playground	Minibar	
Snack shop	Pool	Movies free	
Vending machine	Pool table	Movies surcharge	
Wines	Sauna	Newspaper free	
	Spa	Orthopedic bed	
	Steam room	Phone	
	Swimming pool outdoor	Pillow menu	
	Terrace	Refrigerator	
	Trampoline	Safe	
	Water slides	Satellite TV	
	Wi-Fi	Select Comfort mattress	
	Wi-Fi surcharge		

Appendix I. Table showing the destination attractions featured in hotel descriptions

No	Destination Attractions		
	Esbjerg, Denmark	Ljubljana, Slovenia	Girona, Spain
1	Arnbjerg Park	Atlantis Water Park	Arab Baths
2	Bilund Airport	Bezigrad Stadium	Barcelona
3	Blue Water Arena	BTC	Barri Vell
	Breinholtgard Golf	Cankarjec Centre	
4	Centre		Bars
5	City Centre	City Centre	Bull Ring
6	Cycling	Dragon Bridge	Cafes
	Esbjerg Art Museum	Franciscan Church of the	City Centre
7		A...	
8	Esbjerg Ferry Terminal	Golf Course Trnovo	Costa Brava
	Esbjerg Golf Club	GR- Ljubljana Convention	
9		Centre	Devesa Park
	Esbjerg Harbor	Ljubljana Airport	El Celler Can Roca
10			Restaurant
11	Esbjerg Musikhus	Ljubljana Castle	Espai Girones Shopping
	Esbjerg Performing		
12	Arts...	Ljubljana Opera House	Fira de Girona Convention
13	Fano	Ljubljana Train Station	French Border
14	Fisheries Museum	Ljubljana Zoo	Girona Airport
15	Fishing	Ljubljana Bus Station	Girona Cathedral
	Flood Column	Metelkova	Girona Train and Bus
16			Station
17	Golf Course	Multiplex Film Theatre	Jewish Quarter
18	Ho Bay	National Gallery	La Rambla
19	Ho Bugt Beach	Old Town	Montjuic Castle
20	Holsted Golf Club	Preseren Square	Old Town
	Kommandogarden	Robba Fountain	
21	Museum		Palacio de Congress
22	Kongens Gade shopping	Slovene National Theatre	PGA Catalunya Golf Club
23	Lakolk Beach	St. Nicholas Cathedral	Plaza Catalunya
	Langli	Tivoli Castle	Plaza Independencia
24			Square
25	Legoland	Tivoli Hall	Restaurants
26	List Harbor	Tivoli Park	Shopping
27	Mando	Tivoli Zoo	University
28	Maritime Museum	Town Square	Walls
29	Medieval Town	Triple Bridge	Esbjerg, Denmark cont'd
30	Norholm Gods	University of Ljubljana	Varde Station
31	Ribe Art Museum		Vejen Golf Club
32	Ribe Cathedral		Vejen Sports Center
33	Ribehus Slotsbanke		Vestergade shopping
34	Romo Church		Viking Museum
35	Suburbs		Wadden Sea
36	Tennis Court		Wadden Sea Centre
37	Torvet Square		Water Tower
38	Varde Miniature Town		West Jutland Art Museum

Appendix J. Hotel star rating disparity by destination and OTA

	Star Rating					Point variation
	B	P	H	E	T	
Esbjerg						
Hotel Ansgar	3	3	3	3	3	none
Hjerting Badehotel	3	3	3	3	3	none
Hotel Arnbjerg	3	3	3	3	3	none
Cabinn Hotel Esbjerg	3	3	3	3	3	none
Scandic Olympic	3	3	3.5	3.5	3.5	half
Hotel Dagmar	3	3	3	3	3	none
Hotel Sogarden Brorup	3	3	4	4	4	one
Hotel Vadehavet	3	0	3	3	3	none*
Hotel Varde	3	3	3	3	3	none
Ribe Byferie	4	4	4	4	4	none
Girona						
Hotel Condal	1	1	1	1	1	none
Hotel Europa	2	2	2	2	2	none
Ibis Budget Girona	2	2	3	3	3	one
Peninsular Hotel	3	3	3	3	3	none
Holiday Inn Express	3	2	3	3	3	one
Hotel Ultonia	3	4	3	3	3	one
Melia Girona	4	4	4	4	4	none
Hotel Carlemany	4	4	4	4	4	none
AC Bellavista by Marriott	4	4	4	4	4	none
Hotel URH Girona	4	4	4	4	4	none
Ljubljana						
Hotel Emonec	2	2	3	3	3	one
M Hotel	3	3	3	3	3	none
City Hotel	3	3	3	3	3	none
Design Hotel Mons	4	4	4	4	4	none
Garni Hotel Azur	3	3	3	3	3	none
Hotel Park	3	3	3	3	3	none
Austria Trend Hotel Ljubljana	4	4	4	4	4	none
Best Western Premier Slon	4	3	5	4	4	two
Plaza Hotel Ljubljana	4	4	4	3	3	one
Hotel Lev	4	5	4.5	4.5	4.5	half

*one OTA provided no rating

Key B - Booking.com; E - Expedia.com; P - Priceline.com; H - Hotels.com; T- Travelocity.com

Appendix K. Table of select results of an information consistency test on a 10 hotel sample

Hotel	Information Unit	B*	E*	P*	H*	T*
Condal	Wi-Fi		✓			✓
	Hair dryer				✓	✓
	Free toiletries				✓	✓
	Tour desk	✓		✓		
Budget	Business Centre				✓	
	Wi-Fi		✓		✓	
	Free parking				✓	
Europa	Blackout drapes				✓	
	24 hour room service		✓			✓
Brorup	Breakfast free				✓	✓
	Kid-friendly	✓		✓	✓	
	Hypo-allergenic bedding				✓	
	Iron/ironing board				✓	
	Smoke free					✓
	Limited front desk					✓
	Parking Free	✓		✓		
	Coffee/tea free	✓		✓		
	Bicycle rental					✓
	Spa		✓			✓
Emonec	Safe				✓	✓
	Sofabed		✓			
	Notebook rental	✓		✓		
	Golf discount	✓		✓		
	Shuttle Surcharge				✓	✓
Ultonia	Conference Room					✓
	Bicycle storage free	✓		✓		
	Concierge	✓		✓		
City	Dry cleaning					✓
	Breakfast free				✓	✓
	Bicycle rental free					✓
	Computer station				✓	✓
Carlemany	Refurbished recently	✓		✓		
	Business centre 24 hr				✓	✓
	Laundry service				✓	
	Wedding services					✓
Slon	Business centre				✓	✓
	Gym 24 hr			✓	✓	
	Spa	✓				
	Pillow menu				✓	
	Refrigerator				✓	✓
	Ski storage				✓	✓

Appendix L. Table showing the differences between guest review scores across OTAs

Hotel Name	Guest Review Rating /5					Statistics			
	B*	E*	P	H	T	Avg	Min	Max	Range
Hotel Carlemany	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.5	4.4	4.4	4.5	0.2
Hjerting Badehotel	4.0	4.2	4.1	4.2	4.0	4.1	4.0	4.2	0.2
Garni Hotel Azur	4.3	4.2	4.2	4.1	4.0	4.1	4.0	4.3	0.3
Plaza Hotel Ljubljana	4.5	4.6	4.5	4.7	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.7	0.3
Hotel Sogarden Brorup	3.9	3.7	3.9	3.8	4.0	3.9	3.7	4.0	0.3
City Hotel	4.2	4.1	4.3	4.0	4.0	4.1	4.0	4.3	0.3
Hotel Dagmar	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.9	3.5	3.8	3.5	3.9	0.4
M Hotel	3.8	3.8	3.5	3.9	3.5	3.7	3.5	3.9	0.4
AC Hotel Bellavista	4.3	4.4	4.2	4.3	4.0	4.2	4.0	4.4	0.4
Hotel Park	3.8	3.7	4.0	3.8	3.5	3.8	3.5	4.0	0.5
Best Western Premier	4.3	4.4	4.8	4.4	4.5	4.5	4.3	4.8	0.5
Hotel Varde	3.6	4.1	3.6	4.1	4.0	3.9	3.6	4.1	0.5
Scandic Olympic	3.5	3.8	3.3	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.3	3.8	0.5
Hotel Condal	4.2	4.5	4.2	4.5	4.0	4.3	4.0	4.5	0.5
Hotel Europa	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.9	3.5	3.9	3.5	4.0	0.5
Melia Girona	4.1	4.2	4.5	4.2	4.0	4.2	4.0	4.5	0.5
Hotel URH Girona	4.2	4.4	4.2	4.5	4.0	4.3	4.0	4.5	0.5
Hotel Emonec	3.9	3.8	4.0	3.7	3.5	3.8	3.5	4.0	0.5
Design Hotel Mons	4.3	4.5	4.3	4.5	4.0	4.3	4.0	4.5	0.5
Austria Trend Hotel	4.3	4.3	4.5	4.3	4.0	4.3	4.0	4.5	0.5
Hotel Lev	4.3	4.1	4.5	4.1	4.0	4.2	4.0	4.5	0.5
Cabinn Hotel Esbjerg	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.0	3.5	3.0	3.6	0.6
Hotel Arnbjerg	3.7	3.3	3.7	3.6	3.0	3.4	3.0	3.7	0.7
Hotel Ansgar	4.0	4.2	3.9	4.1	3.5	3.9	3.5	4.2	0.7
Hotel Vadehavet	3.3	3.5	3.3	2.8	3.5	3.3	2.8	3.5	0.7
Hotel Ultonia	4.3	4.0	3.7	4.0	4.5	4.1	3.7	4.5	0.9
Ribe Byferie	4.2	4.5	4.2	4.5	3.5	4.2	3.5	4.5	1.0
Ibis Budget Girona	3.8	3.3	3.8	4.3	4.0	3.8	3.3	4.3	1.0
Peninsular Hotel	4.2	4.0	3.0	4.0	4.0	3.8	3.0	4.2	1.2
Holiday Inn Express	4.2	4.2	3.2	4.3	5.0	4.2	3.2	5.0	1.9

*converted from a 10 point scale

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