

Online Reviews and Generation Z's Hotel Choice: Evidence from an Eye-Tracking Study

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Abstract:

Online reviews are one of the most popular sources of information when planning trips. This study aims to assess the role of reviews in generation Z's hotel choice at Booking.com. Analysis of eye-tracking data and respondents' paths on the site shows that reviews have an impact on hotel choice. According to the regression analysis, the order of reviews, titles, photos in reviews and the length of text with negative experience have a significant impact on the total duration of fixation of the respondents' gaze. The paper also discusses the features of reviews that affect their perceived usefulness, credibility, and valence.

Keywords: hotel choice, online reviews, eye-tracking

1. Introduction

Online reviews and other forms of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) significantly influence consumer decisions in various markets (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017). Among other things, eWOM has changed the decision-making process for purchasing travel products such as tours and hotel accommodation (Litvin et al., 2008). Empirical evidence shows that online reviews are the second most frequently used information source for planning and booking trips right after search engines (Yang et al., 2018). The importance of online reviews has managerial implications: positive reviews can significantly increase hotel bookings (Ye et al., 2011).

Despite the empirical evidence on the role of reviews in hotel choice decisions, there are several reasons to readdress this issue. First, generation Z (Gen Z), that becoming one of the most active consumers in the tourism market, has specific behavioral features when choosing a destination (Liberato et al., 2019) or a hotel (Wiasuti et al., 2020). In particular, tourists of this generation are believed to base their travel decisions on reviews by strangers and friends (Williams, 2019). Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed both the behavior of tourists in general and their approach to choosing a hotel online (Li et al., 2021). Finally, there is still very little empirical neuromarketing research modeling online hotel selection (Noone and Robson, 2014). Our study aims to fill these research gaps by exploring generation Z's hotel choice using a combination of neuromarketing and survey methods.

2. Literature review

The first studies assessing the impact of online reviews on travel decisions emerged in the 2000s alongside the rapid development of platforms such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com (Litvin et al., 2008). Subsequent empirical studies found that TripAdvisor users read online reviews during their hotel selection process (Prabu, 2014) and claim reviews to be one of the most important factors in deciding where to stay (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). Evidence on the importance of ratings and reviews has also been obtained in the study involving Booking.com users (Gavilan et al., 2018).

Recent empirical research has focused on specific features of reviews. An experimental study using a fictional travel review website has shown that recent reviews are more influential than older reviews and recent positive reviews can mitigate the impact of older negative reviews (Sparks and Browning, 2011). A similar experiment with an "artificial" hotel website in a study (Gellerstedt and Arvemo, 2019) showed that friends' recommendation has a greater impact on the hotel choice decision than strangers' reviews.

The application of neurobiological approaches in tourism studies gives a more detailed understanding of the tourists' behavior and choices. The pilot EEG-based study (Tosun et al., 2016) proved the importance of such factors of hotel choice as service, price, comfort, quality, and location. Pan and Zhang (2010) used eye-tracking to examine the impact of images on hotel choice. The presence of images on a hotel page reduces the user's cognitive load, as they are easier and faster to evaluate, which ultimately allows users to view more options and explore each one in more detail. The important role of photographs in hotel choice was also confirmed in a study (Espigares-Jurado et al., 2020). This recent study using an eye-tracking method found that the top of the page is the most effective location for photos.

Hotel online reviews were also studied in several eye-tracking pieces of research. The study by Aicher et al. (2016) used an eye-tracker to compare symbolic elements such as rating, stars, and hotel photos, and review text when choosing a hotel. The results showed that respondents looked at the headlines of the reviews about the same as at the symbolic elements, but looked at the text of the reviews much less. Half of the respondents in the post-experiment poll indicated that reviews influenced their decision to book a hotel.

The paper by Noone and Robson (2014), using eye-tracking, explored elements of the online travel agency's website, which users are looking at when choosing a hotel. The study reveals that at the first stage, respondents paid more attention to the ranking on the site while at the second stage they focus on user reviews.

While the impact of reviews on hotel choices has been empirically proven, there are still some unexplored questions in this area. In particular, there is very limited evidence on the impact of various features of online reviews on hotel choices. Insights on this issue can be obtained in a mixed-methodology study, including both neuromarketing and self-reported data. This approach will be used in this paper with a particular focus on hotel choice decisions of generation Z's consumers.

3. Research questions, design, and data

We identified three research questions (RQ) to define the focus of our research:

RQ1. Do reviews have a significant impact on the choice of a hotel online by respondents of generation Z?

RQ2. What types of reviews attract more respondents' attention when choosing a hotel online?

RQ3. What features of the review affect its subjectively perceived usefulness, credibility, and valence?

We conducted a mixed-methodology empirical study to answer these research questions. In the study, we modeled consumer choice using the Booking.com website (desktop version) to assess the impact of reviews on consumers' online hotel choices. The use of the eye-tracking method in conjunction with the respondents' self-assessment (for example, using a survey or interview) allows a more comprehensive and reliable assessment of the behavior of tourists on the sites (Marchiori and Cantoni, 2015), since using only the respondent's self-assessment is highly subjective, and using only eye-tracking data will not explain the respondent's behavior. We used the eye-tracking method to quantify the respondent's conscious attention; it measures the duration of the respondent's gaze fixation on the elements of the site.

At stage 1, respondents chose their hotel for one night using only Booking.com. The destination was a mid-sized city in Russia (Tambov), which none of the respondents had previously visited, so there was no influence of previous experience. The use of the existing site made it possible to study consumer behavior close to real life. However, the path of each respondent is individual, so at stage 2, we applied the modeling of choice: respondents viewed a modified hotel page. It was created based on the hotel page selected in the first stage (for each respondent), but the reviews were replaced. In addition, we changed the name of the hotel and the photos so that the respondent perceives the hotel as a real one (all other content on the page has been kept intact). This approach made it possible to take into account the preferences of the respondent because at the first stage he chose a hotel that suits him in terms of price and facilities. The respondent made the final choice between the first hotel and the new modified one: the respondent's behavior was still oriented towards choice, he or she was at the stage of deliberation, but at the same time, we were able to manipulate the content on the page.

We selected 18 reviews published on the Booking.com in 2018 while controlling the combination of characteristics and an equal number in groups: containing only positive/only negative/both experience; short/long review; anonymous review/written by a man/written by a woman. References to specific prices and locations were excluded from the texts. Each review was randomly dated (6 reviews for 2018, 2019, and 2020). A random sequence of reviews was generated for each respondent. We also checked the presence of photos in the review, the title of the review, the avatar of the reviewer, etc. This method of selecting reviews for the

modified page allowed us to study how respondents perceived each review. The respondents rated the usefulness (-3 = extremely not useful, +3 = extremely useful), credibility (-3 = extremely not credible, +3 = extremely credible), and the valence of the review (-3 = extremely negative, +3 = extremely positive) on a 7-point scale of the semantic differential. The respondents also assessed how strongly certain factors usually influence their choice of a hotel on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all influential, 7 = extremely influential). We analyzed the Booking.com website and identified 31 factors that the respondent could pay attention to when choosing a hotel or come across in reviews. This mixed methodology allowed us to compare the behavior of the respondents during the experiment and their self-reported importance of different elements. Table 1 summarizes the stages of our study and collected data.

Stage	Data
1 choosing a hotel on Booking.com (eye tracking, monitor recording)	Respondent's path; the duration of the respondent's gaze fixation on the reviews
2 viewing the modified hotel page (eye tracking, monitor recording)	Respondent's path; the duration of the respondent's gaze fixation on the elements of the site
Influence of factors on choice (questionnaire)	Self-reported influence of factors on respondent's choice
Perception of reviews (questionnaire)	Self-reported perception of reviews (usefulness, credibility, valence)

Table 1. Stages and data of empirical study

In the experiment, we used the NTrend eye-tracker mounted under the monitor. The module recorded the coordinates of the direction of gaze in pixel coordinates of the screen and the diameter of the pupil, and the built-in camera recorded the face of the respondent. Eye-tracking data was analyzed using areas of interest, dynamic gaze plots, and heat maps.

The final sample consisted of 20 respondents (eye-tracking data for one man and one woman were excluded for technical reasons, but their questionnaires were analyzed along with the rest). The typical sample size for eye-tracking studies in tourism, according to various estimates, ranges from 12 to 25-30 (Scott et al, 2019).

To form the sample, an initial screening of respondents was carried out using an online questionnaire. There was an equal number of men and women in the sample. No significant differences were found between men and women according to the screening questionnaire (the Mann-Whitney U-test was used), which indicates a good quality of the selection of respondents. All respondents have no experience in tourism, they are between 18 and 25 years old, each booked a hotel online at least once in the last year. 18 out of 22 respondents have stayed at the hotel up to 4 times in the past year, the rest of them have stayed 5 to 10 times. In interviews, respondents explained a slight decrease in the overall frequency of travel and hotel bookings by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, travel bans, and border closures. All respondents indicated that they use Booking.com when choosing a hotel, seven respondents indicated Airbnb, and two respondents mentioned Ostrovok.ru (Russian online travel service) and hotels' websites. 21 out of 22 respondents use desktop or laptop computers (with varying degrees of frequency) to select a hotel. There was no budget constraint; the respondents proceeded from their financial capabilities, as in the study (Pan et al., 2012). The sample included respondents from families with different financial conditions, but the vast majority of respondents (21) are willing to pay for a hotel room for 1 night up to 9,200 rubles (≈ 102

euros), of which 12 are in the lower Booking.com price range of up to 4,600 rubles (\approx 51 euros). However, in the selected tourist destination, almost all possible options belong to this price range, so this did not greatly affect the choice of the respondents.

Before starting the experiment, all respondents filled out a standard informed consent form. All of them were also familiarized with the equipment used and the rules of the experiment. The vision of all respondents was normal or corrected to normal.

4. Key results and their discussion

4.1 Choosing a hotel (Booking.com)

The experiment started with the Booking search bar. The respondents went to a page with a list of possible placement options (“browsing”). Here, on average, respondents applied 2.7 filters (from 0 to 7 filters). The respondents most often applied the filters "Less than 3 km" (16) and "Hotels" (11) since these parameters were specified in the task. 8 respondents opened a page with a map. Only 5 out of 22 respondents used the sorting function. The average time for choosing a hotel was about 10 minutes (from 3 min 9 sec to 23 min 44 sec). On average, respondents visited 3.8 hotel pages in the "deliberation" stage (clicked on a hotel while browsing the hotel listing and went to the hotel page for more details). Four respondents only visited 1 page; the maximum number of viewed hotel pages is eight. The correlation between the duration of the selection process and the number of hotels viewed was 0.76. To make the results between the respondents comparable, further analysis of the eye-tracking data was carried out using the average values.

We have summarized the fixations of the gaze of each respondent at all possible placements of reviews and ratings on the pages of the Booking website. We calculated average gaze fixations for the page elements of the chosen hotel and all other hotels in the consideration set (Table 2).

Element	All hotels	Chosen hotel	Consideration set (excluding chosen one)	p-value
Score (browsing)	8.03			
All reviews	6.60	12.65	4.41	0.009
Panel reviews	3.23	5.46	2.57	0.178
Bottom reviews	1.85	4.89	0.76	0.045
Top review	0.72	1.15	0.41	0.061
Photopanel reviews	0.80	1.16	0.68	0.610
All scores	0.49	0.92	0.30	0.010
All categories	0.19	0.43	0.14	0.343

Table 2. The average duration of gaze fixation on selected elements, sec (total number of respondents N=20)

The results of this study are in line with the findings by Noone and Robson (2014): at the “browse” stage, respondents look at the hotel's overall guest score, and at the “deliberation” stage, they pay attention to the hotel reviews (although it is incorrect to compare quantitative results due to differences in methodologies).

On average, respondents looked at reviews for the longest time on the reviews panel, presumably because they took a targeted action (to click on the "Read all reviews" button). The bottom block of guest reviews usually drew the respondents' attention while scrolling through the page and some respondents lingered on it and read several reviews. Respondents looked least at reviews on the photo panel.

The respondents looked at the reviews of the chosen hotel on average 12.65 seconds (looking at an average of 6.1 reviews), while they looked at the reviews of hotels from the

consideration set on average 4.41 seconds (2.5 reviews). They viewed the top review of the chosen hotel on average for 1.15 seconds (almost all respondents watched it, on average 0.9 reviews) and on the pages of other hotels 0.41 seconds (0.3 reviews). The respondents viewed in the bottom block of reviews on average 1.8 reviews for the chosen hotel within 4.89 seconds and the rest 0.5 reviews within 0.76 seconds. The differences in reviews on the photo panel and the reviews panel turned out to be statistically insignificant. The respondents almost did not read the reviews on the photo panel, as they looked at the photos, and read many reviews on the reviews panel when they wanted to study them, both on the page of the chosen hotel and the remaining pages.

4.2 Modeling of choice (a modified hotel page)

At the second stage of the experiment, the respondents were put in the same conditions - they were looking at 1 non-clickable page that they could scroll. However, the duration of the choice was still very different (from 79 to 361 seconds), the average time was 174 seconds. We calculated the average relative gaze fixation for page elements as a percentage of the page view duration (Figure 1).

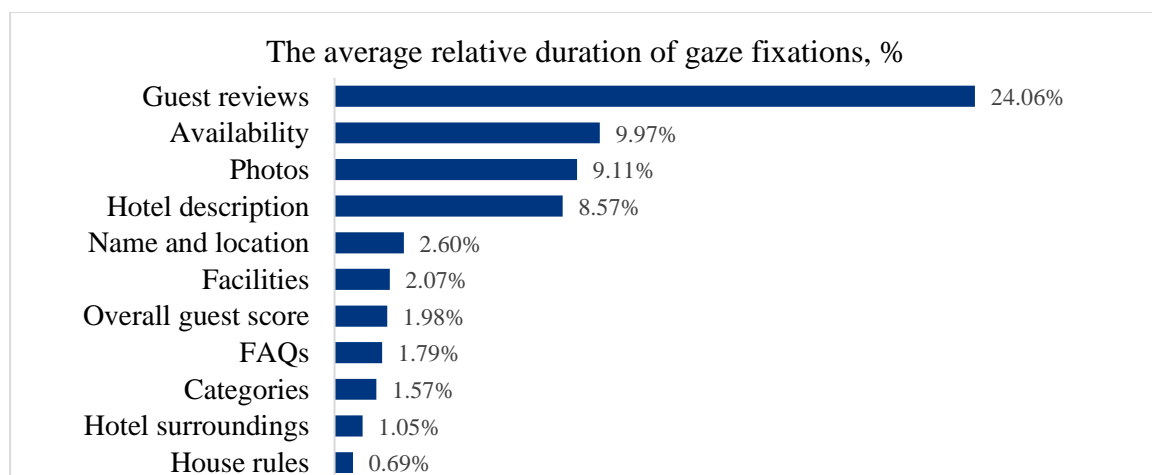


Figure 1. Relative duration of gaze fixations, % (total number of respondents N=20)

The respondents looked at the hotel-generated content on average 35.8% of the time and looked at the user-generated content (reviews, ratings, categories) a little less, but still a fairly large percentage of the total duration, 27.6%. On average, respondents looked at reviews for the longest time (24.06%), which confirms the important role of reviews in choosing a hotel. Further, in descending order of percentage of the duration, there is the “Availability” block (9.97%), where Booking.com provides information about various hotel offers, hotel photos (9.11%), and a description (8.57%).

However, as shown in the work (Marchiori and Cantoni, 2015), the duration of the fixation of the respondents' gaze does not always correlate with the importance of some element of the page for them. A study (Pan and Zhang, 2010) has shown that photographs, as opposed to text, reduce cognitive load when choosing a hotel. This allows respondents to view more photos and hotel pages compared to text-only options. Therefore, respondents also rated on a 7-point Likert scale how strongly certain factors influence their choice of hotel. The results show a difference between the eye-tracking data and the respondents' self-assessment. Photos, which were looked at on average by 9.11% of the total duration of the selection, took the leading place in the questionnaire (6.5 out of 7). Then, in descending order, there are prices (6.27), room characteristics (6.09), location (6.05), average rating (5.86) - and only then the content of reviews (5.36), which were leading in terms of relative the duration of the

fixations. We will not cite other factors, the influence of which was even less estimated, except for the number of reviews (4.36 out of 7, 18th place).

According to the results of the second part of the experiment, 20 out of 22 respondents "stayed" in the hotel chosen at the first stage. Since not only reviews were replaced on the page, but also photos, both factors could have influenced the respondent's decision. In interviews, 17 respondents clearly stated that their choice was influenced by hotel reviews. An insufficient number of photographs (8) and the worst design of the hotel (18), assessed by photographs, were also named as reasons.

4.3 Perception of reviews

Table 3 presents the results of the regression analysis.

In model (1), the dependent variable was the total duration of fixation of the gaze of each respondent on each of the 18 reviews. The higher the review was on the page, the longer the respondent looked at the review. Unusual title (for example, "We were not expected here... so we won't come again" instead of "Unsatisfactory") attracted more respondents' attention, as did the presence of photos in the review. Also, the more lines were in a negative paragraph, the longer the respondents looked at the review. Thus, we have identified 4 "visual" factors that can have a significant impact on the time of reading (or at least viewing) a review.

To analyze the perception of reviews, we used the marks given by 22 respondents in the questionnaire after the second part of the experiment. The serial number of the review on the page did not have a significant effect in any of the models 2-5, so the perception of review by the respondents during filling out the questionnaire did not significantly change over time.

In model (2), valence is significantly positively influenced by the rating given to the hotel by the reviewer and the size of the positive paragraph, while the size of the negative paragraph has a negative effect. Also, the presence of only a positive paragraph had a significantly positive effect, while the presence of only a negative paragraph in other specifications did not show a significant effect.

In model (3), the unusual title of the review and user-generated photo content showed a significant positive impact on the usefulness of the review. A significant positive impact was also shown by the number of "cues" described in the review, that is, the "informativeness" of the review. This variable is positively correlated with the length of the review text. Reviews with negative valence were perceived by respondents as more useful.

Models (4) and (5) identified factors that had a significant impact on the perceived credibility of reviews. The photographs increased the credibility of the review, as they served as confirmation the reality of the reviewer's experience. Also in model (4), the credibility of the review was influenced by the year it was written, but the effect was not significant in other specifications. At the same time, in interviews, many respondents said that they would not read a too old review. Perhaps respondents simply did not look at the review date when filling out the questionnaire, because by default they considered reviews sorted by date. The number of lines in a positive and negative paragraph positively affects the perceived credibility of a review. These variables show the ratio of positive and negative text in a review, so they can be considered proxy valence variables. Moreover, respondents perceived reviews that contained only a positive paragraph as less credible. In interviews, respondents mentioned that such reviews are most likely fakes. In model (4), anonymous reviews were rated as less credible, so the presence of the author's name, on the contrary, has a positive effect on the perceived credibility of the review. Model (5) shows that the clarity of the author's gender increased the perceived credibility of the review compared to anonymous reviews.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Gaze fixation duration (1)	Valence (2)	Usefulness (3)	Credibility (4) (5)	
serial number of review	-0.155*** (0.024)				
informativeness			0.218*** (0.027)		
unusual title	0.725** (0.339)		0.563*** (0.180)		
anonymous review				-0.433*** (0.136)	
year				0.143* (0.075)	
female					0.650*** (0.143)
male					0.287* (0.159)
photo ugc	0.922*** (0.253)		0.423** (0.189)	0.724*** (0.162)	0.745*** (0.161)
valence			-0.082** (0.036)		
reviewer's score		0.658*** (0.035)			
size of positive paragraph		0.141*** (0.031)		0.298*** (0.039)	0.305*** (0.039)
size of negative paragraph	0.273*** (0.062)	-0.120*** (0.028)		0.078*** (0.030)	0.069** (0.029)
positive paragraph only		0.465** (0.195)		-0.815*** (0.220)	-0.906*** (0.215)
constant	1.989*** (0.541)	-5.030*** (0.296)	-0.548 (0.434)	-288.468* (150.446)	0.135 (0.377)
Observations (N)	360	396	396	396	396
R ²	0.475	0.810	0.363	0.427	0.431
Adjusted R ²	0.439	0.797	0.320	0.385	0.389
p-value (F)	***	***	***	***	***
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01				

Table 3. Regression results. Calculated in R, lm model, dummy variables for respondents (not shown in the table), and the robust HC1 standard errors.

5. Conclusion, limitations and further research

Our study revealed some useful insights for both online travel agencies and hotel managers.

We used the eye-tracking method to get quantitative data on the gaze fixation of the respondent on the reviews while looking at the pages of the selected hotel and all other hotels from the set in question. The data obtained indicate that, on average, respondents look significantly longer at the reviews of the selected hotel. Thus, reviews are more likely to confirm the user's choice after the hotel has been “pre-selected” based on other parameters

(price, photos, etc.). This conclusion is confirmed by the results of the second stage of the experiment with viewing the modified page. Although respondents looked at reviews for the largest percentage of the total duration of viewing the page compared to other elements, according to the results of the questionnaire, respondents believe that their choice is influenced primarily by photos, then price, type of placement, location, and average rating, and only then the content of the reviews.

The results of the regression analysis showed that the total duration of the fixation of the respondents' gaze on the review is significantly influenced by the serial number of the review on the page, the presence of photos in the review, the title, and the length of the paragraph with a negative experience. The factors that influence the perceived usefulness, credibility, and valence of the review were also identified.

Thus, the combined research methodology allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the impact of reviews on Gen Z's tourists. Hotels have to pay attention to both the information they provide to aggregators and guest reviews, encouraging current guests to share their experiences with those who are just planning a trip. Reviews do affect consumers' hotel choices, which is why hotels need to respond to user reviews and strive to improve the customer experience to generate positive online feedback. Online booking systems should post reviews with photos above on the page as they grab the attention of users and increase the perceived usefulness and credibility of the review.

The results obtained are valid for the Booking.com site. It is possible that when examining the selection on other sites, the results will differ since the sites differ in functionality, the arrangement of elements on the page, colors, and designs, etc. The behavior when choosing a hotel and the amount of time spent on the site may also differ depending on the length of the trip (for longer trips, price sensitivity may increase, etc.), the destination (for example, for traveling abroad), and the purpose of the trip (for example, for a beach holiday "all-inclusive"). In addition, a promising area for further research is the comparison of hotel selection by users of different generations.

Despite these limitations, the use of eye-tracking allowed us to analyze in detail the individual path of the respondent and highlight certain patterns of behavior. The application of this approach will help to better understand features and motivations of tourist choice.

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