

# **Interview study of online travel reviews and their impact on a person's decision making process**



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## **Abstract**

In the past people sought for information via libraries, travel magazines or were inspired by marketing the travel agency made in order to attract consumers. Before the Internet era one way communication was the right way to follow. Since Internet was developed two ways communication has evolved and people can talk to each other worldwide. The development of the two ways communication has created a travel website where people can share and spread their opinions.

Today people search for the most satisfying travel choice which makes more than one destination alternative selectable. The online reviews may extend or reduce an alternatives lifetime in the decision process. The online reviews are important factors in a person's decision therefore the aim with this thesis is to investigate and evaluate how and if these online reviews affect a person's decision-making process. The issue is based on what people think about online reviews, why they use them, how strong impact electronic word of mouth have against word of mouth, to the extent to which online reviews are used in a potential customers decision making.

To obtain a result of the study, interviews with a focus group and a number of semi-structured interviews have been conducted. The result highlights the dominance online reviews have on a person's choice. The participants in the paper believe that online reviews are good to rely on to get broad information and that they affect one. Participants, however, say that online reviews do not affect the final outcome but can affect the details of the arranged trip.

**Keywords: Consumer behaviour, decision-making process, electronic word-of-mouth, word of mouth, social media, TripAdvisor.com, online travel reviews.**

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## **Thesis outline**

The thesis is divided into different chapters.

- Introduction: Background, research aim, research questions, goal and list of definitions.
- Theory: Presenting relevant theories for the thesis. Consumer behaviour and decision making, six step behaviour model, electronic word of mouth (eWoM), how electronic word of mouth influence consumer product judgement and role of social media in online travel information search.
- Method: The chosen methods, the approach, reliability and validity and limitations will be discussed.
- Empirical Material: Presenting the research questions and the interview material.
- Analysis: Linking theories and interviews together.
- Conclusion: Responds the thesis aim and link theory, empirical material and analysis together.
- Further research: Investigation possibilities.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Individuals with different backgrounds tends to travel more and more, wanting to go to destinations with many attractions, to smaller authentic villages to meet new cultures or adventurous sites where few people have dared to go. For the year as a whole, the number of international tourist arrivals is expected to reach one billion for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

Before their journey start they explore the Internet for information from articles or travel agency websites and online communities and travel review sites. According to a recent report by PhoCusWright people are turning to travel review websites for advice and tips when choosing a leisure travel destination. Some people still prefer information from online travel agencies but in example 21 % of both French and German persons visited a review site 2011, compared to 13 % and 14 %, respectively, in 2010.<sup>2</sup>

More than 2 billion out of nearly 7 billion people is using Internet today.<sup>3</sup> Technology have made it possible to stay online and updated almost everywhere, in store, at home, at sea or in the air. In fact, the tourism industry has been a pioneer in the development of information technology according to Buhalis and has redoubtably changed both business practices and strategies such as how to gain competitive advantages.<sup>4</sup> The important word-of-mouth has become electronic-word-of-mouth, which makes it easier to communicate via social media like review sites, blogs, mail or news group's etcetera. This has led customers to communicate, writing their thoughts and perspectives on travel review sites, where others can read, ask, agree or disagree. A popular site for review sharing is [www.TripAdvisor.com](http://www.TripAdvisor.com) which is useful to share knowledge and ask questions about a certain destination, hotel or attraction.<sup>5</sup>

From earlier research Park and Kim, focusing on the type and number of reviews found out that there is different purchase intentions between novices and experts when have read reviews.<sup>6</sup> To understand electronic word of mouth (eWoM) Goldsmith and Horowitz measured consumer motivations for online opinion seeking.<sup>7</sup> Buhalis and Law mention in their article that increasingly ICT (information and communication technology) will provide new "info-structure" for the whole tourism industry.<sup>8</sup> The future of eTourism will be focused on customer-centric technologies that will focus on companies interact dynamically with customers.<sup>9</sup> Zou, Yu and Hao researched the inconsistent relationship between negative and positive online consumer reviews and

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<sup>1</sup> Press release from World Tourism Organization UNWTO, International tourism of to a strong start in 2012. Published 10<sup>th</sup> of May, 2012. Information retrieved on 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, 2012. 2012.

<sup>2</sup>Schetzina, C. 'TripAdvisor is Not the Only Place for Reviews: U.S. and European Destination Selectors Weigh In'. Review of: *PhoCusWright's Destination Unknown: How U.S. and European Travelers Decide Where to Go 2011 – a Global and European Edition publication*, (2011). Information retrieved 2012, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 13.10 am. 2012.

<sup>3</sup>Statistical information about Internet usage. Statistics are from December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011. Information retrieved 2012, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 15.30 am.

<sup>4</sup>Buhalis, D., Law, R. 'Progress in tourism management: Twenty years on and 10 years after the internet: The state of eTourism research'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management vol. 29*. 2008, p: 609.

<sup>5</sup>Internet websites: [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com), [www.yelp.com](http://www.yelp.com) and [www.virtualtourist.com](http://www.virtualtourist.com).

<sup>6</sup>Park, D-H, Kim, S. 'The effects of consumer knowledge on message processing of electronic word-of-mouth via online consumer reviews'. Electronic article in: *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications vol. 7*. Published by: Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2008, p: 399-410.

<sup>7</sup> Goldsmith, R. E., Horowitz, D. 'Measuring Motivations for Online Opinion Seeking'. Electronic article on: *Journal of Interactive Advertising, vol. 6, no 2*. Published by: The American Academy of Advertising, Texas, USA. 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Buhalis, D., Law, R. 'Progress in tourism management: Twenty years on and 10 years after the internet: The state of eTourism research'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management vol. 29*. 2008, p: 609.

<sup>9</sup>Buhalis, D., Law, R. 'Progress in tourism management: Twenty years on and 10 years after the internet: The state of eTourism research'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management vol. 29*. Published by: Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2008, p: 619-620.

consumer decision making. Their experiment design showed that the valence is moderated by consumer expertise: consumer with lower expertise is being more affected by the difference between negative and positive reviews.<sup>10</sup> It has become important to acknowledge the factors which make customers adopt the online opinions in online communities and how companies shall create strategies to provide profit. A recent survey showed that people trusted online opinions as much as they trusted brand websites.<sup>11</sup>

A similar comprehensive quantitative study has been done on the role and impact of travel reviews in the pleasure trip planning process by Gretzel, Yoo and Purifoy.<sup>12</sup> They did an online survey which presented characteristics that are important to be “seen” (read) in a review to impact on a person. Their study does not cover if and how a review influences a customer to change destination.

This study fills another research gap in social media. From personal interest in social media it is interesting to study how and if people are affected by online reviews in their decision-making process. There are so many words that can be said and now more than ever people share these opinions to make other people choose right options or to make them choose a less negative alternative. A review is a written comment with an evaluation of in example a movie, a company, a destination or a service.<sup>13</sup>

Earlier the marketing, magazines or any businesses wrote what was the most suitable to them to influence the customers to choose their option. But today Internet and social media with online reviews spreads opinions which are personal experiences and are not colored in a certain way. It is interesting to attain if a website with online reviews is of use and this will be researched through interviews with people who have been traveling.

There are different sites online which niche themselves to sample people’s reviews and this creates both positive and negative criticism for the destination. This thesis focuses on [www.TripAdvisor.com](http://www.TripAdvisor.com). The website also focuses on restaurants, attractions and hotels etcetera.

In order to participate in the surveys the participants had to compose their own travel with online reviews as opinions about their journey. This is to see how they affect the participant’s choices. Word of mouth (WoM) is a strong way to communicate and affect but with electronic word of mouth (eWoM) it is easier to reach more people in a shorter period of time. This investigation will emphasize to understand to which degree an online review affects a person’s choice where to travel.

## **1.2 Research aim**

The aim of this paper is to contribute with knowledge how people use electronic word of mouth by the use of online travel reviews on [www.TripAdvisor.com](http://www.TripAdvisor.com). The study also aims to understand if and how potential customers are affected by online travel reviews.

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<sup>10</sup>Zou, P., Yu, B., Hao, Y. ‘Does the Valence of Online Consumer Reviews matter for Consumer Decision Making? The Moderating Role of Consumer Expertise’. Electronic article in: *Journal of computers*, vol. 6. Published by: Academy Publisher, Oulu, Finland. 2011, p: 484.

<sup>11</sup>Cheung, C. Lee, M. And Rabjohn, N.’ The impact of electronic word-of-mouth, The adaption of online opinions in online customer communities’. Electronic article in: *Internet Research*, Vol. 18. Published by: Emerald Group Publishing Limited. Bingley, England. 2008, p: 229-244.

<sup>12</sup> Gretzel, U., Yoo, K, H., Purifoy, M. *Online travel review study – Role & impact of online travel reviews*. Published by: Laboratory for intelligent systems in tourism, Texas, USA. 2007, p: 4-68.

<sup>13</sup> *Dictionary website to explain the word review*. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/review>. Information retrieved on 2012 November 13<sup>th</sup>, 16.30 am

### 1.3 Research questions

- What makes a person choose to use online reviews in the decision making process when considering a destination?
- What attitude has potential consumers to online reviews?
- How do online reviews stand up against word of mouth in affecting a person's decision-making?
- To which degree affects online travel reviews the decision making of a destination?

### 1.4 Goal

The goal is to create a better understanding about online reviews and its ability to influence. Why it impacts and how huge the influence is. This information will provide good knowledge to businesses on a destination as well as destination marketers.

### 1.5 List of definitions

eWoM	Electronic word of mouth, spreading information between people online.
WoM	Word of mouth, spreading information between people.
eTourism	Tourism online, selling travels, buying travels, tourism marketing.
TripAdvisor.com	www.tripadvisor.com, an online travel review site.
Social media	Where people can chat, share information, in example TripAdvisor.com.
Skype	Chat program with video.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This chapter deals with the theoretical foundations chosen for this study. The theoretical framework is based on psychological and external processes such as behaviour and the decision-making of a customer, spreading information with electronic word-of-mouth on the Internet, how data can influence a person's judgement and what role social media have when searching for travel information. Also a six step model based on providing the best optimal result is used. These theories and model together provide a basis to research how electronic word of mouth affects a decision-making.

### 2.1 Consumer behaviour and their decision-making

Moutinho refers consumer behaviour as the process of collecting and organizing information about a service or a product in the direction of a buying decision and then use it and evaluate it.<sup>14</sup> When a person is buying a service in example where the customer are going to spend the vacation, the decisions are made with some unique aspects because the person is buying something intangible which is done after consideration and neither expectation nor money will be returned if the destination were not satisfying. Moutinho declares "a decision is an outcome of a mental process whereby one action is chosen from a set of available alternatives"<sup>15</sup>. There are certain elements that interacts in the psychological field of the consumer that influence behaviour and they interact at different stages, from arousal to decision, as well from purchase to post-purchase experiences.

There have been two dominant views in the literature regarding consumer behaviour, satisficing and utility theory which evolved during the 1950's.<sup>16</sup> One view emerges from the neoclassical economics literature and assumes perfect rationality on the part of consumers while they engage in making decisions regarding their consumption baskets. The other view that predominates the thinking in psychology and marketing literature is the one of bounded rationality. The bounded rationality consumers cannot be perfectly rational because they are inhibited by their cognitive capabilities.<sup>17</sup> Tangible aspects are taken into consideration when the decision-making process of an intangible service product is being purchased. People use their less effortful and less accurate heuristics to make their decisions, instead of being perfectly rational. Mishra and Olshavsky mention heuristics as constructed of a benefit-cost or an accuracy-effort trade-off.<sup>18</sup> The heuristic view assumes that consumer in decision situations will "adapt" and try to form a trade-off between the cognitive feelings they have to expend in making decisions and the accuracy of their decisions. This approach assumes to form satisficing decisions, rather than optimal ones. In the 1970's both theories expanded and developed a new theory that encompassed the best aspect of each, the prospect theory.<sup>19</sup> This led to the development and exploration of a series of useful consumer decision-making strategies that could be exploited by marketers. Today's controlled environment present a lot of

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<sup>14</sup>Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 41.

<sup>15</sup>Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 41.

<sup>16</sup> Richarme, M. *Consumer Decision-Making Models, Strategies, and Theories, Oh My!* Published by: Decision Analyst, Arlington, Texas, USA. Retrieved on: 2012, 30<sup>th</sup> of August, 16.00 am. 2005, p: 1.

<sup>17</sup>Mishra, S., Olshavsky, R. W. (2005, p: 362) 'Rationality Unbounded: The Internet and Its Effect on Consumer Decision Making', article in: Haugtvedt, C. P., Machleit, K. A., Yalch, R. F. (edt.) *Online Consumer Psychology. Understanding and Influencing Consumer Behaviour in the Virtual World*. Published by: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, London, England. 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Mishra, S., Olshavsky, R. W. (2005, p: 362) 'Rationality Unbounded: The Internet and Its Effect on Consumer Decision Making', article in: Haugtvedt, C. P., Machleit, K. A., Yalch, R. F. (edt.) *Online Consumer Psychology. Understanding and Influencing Consumer Behaviour in the Virtual World*. Published by: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, London, England. 2005.

<sup>19</sup>Richarme, M. *Consumer Decision-Making Models, Strategies, and Theories, Oh My!* Published by: Decision Analyst, Arlington, Texas, USA. Retrieved on: 2012, 30<sup>th</sup> of August, 16.00 am. 2005, p: 1-2.

choices for the customer, but knowing the underlying variables and the choices, it all can be decomposed to understand the conscious and unconscious elements which are driving the consumer's choices.

A tourism product is largely a service and the characteristics of a service are as being: intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, perishability and lack of ownership.<sup>20</sup> Service are being intangible, they cannot be smelled, seen or tasted before the purchase and to overcome this problem tourism companies in example offer their customers a video of the destination to make it seem more "real". Even though technology gives a good advantage with visual reality still people take a risk when buying a tourism product because of its intangible character. Service is able to overlap between the production, performance of the service and the consumption of it and service in its purest sense is when the customer and provider stand face to face. This will influence buying behaviour and may change the behaviour patterns of the customer, according to their experiences. Service will always be heterogeneous because it is difficult for the service provider to give the same service twice, in example mood or the whole service have changed perceptions etcetera. This makes it challenging for the consumer to know the potential quality of the experience and therefore it is dangerous to rely on past knowledge. When buying a service it access to the facility and to activities etcetera the person gets. Therefore, at the end service often leads to feelings of satisfaction rather than the ownership of a tangible item.<sup>21</sup> Hence to buying a service the emotional significance for the customer is important.

Making important decisions is not an easy thing and many factors may impact during the decision making process such as cultural influences and reference groups, a person's own personality, perceptions, memories and images, information, motivation, attitudes, perceived risk and family. "Culture is the complex abstract and material elements created by society"<sup>22</sup> and in the context of consumer behaviour it regards immaterial elements such as learned beliefs, values and customs and material elements, which serve to regulate the consumption patterns of members of a particular society. Within the society there is one important factor influencing consumer behaviour and that is social class; the individuals in the social classes share similar lifestyles, behaviour standards and values. Murray concludes that "service consumers prefer the opinions and experiences of other comparable individuals in making service purchase decisions"<sup>23</sup>. Inside the social class the individuals turn to each other for standards of judgement which can influence the individual's choices, attitudes and beliefs. References are classified into two groups; first the primary group with regular contact such as family and friends and the second group is where the person's interacts inconsistently with references such as the neighbourhood, opinion leaders or the trade union.<sup>24</sup> The reference group "exert the most influence over most aspects of consumer behaviour, especially the decision-making process"<sup>25</sup>, according to Peter and Olson.

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<sup>20</sup> Williams, A. *Understanding the hospitality consumer*. Published by: Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, Oxford, England. 2002, p: 26-28.

<sup>21</sup> Swarbrooke, J., Horner, S. *Consumer Behaviour in Tourism*. Published by: Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford. Oxford, England. 1999, p:69-70.

<sup>22</sup> Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 42

<sup>23</sup> Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 59.

<sup>24</sup> Peter, J.P. and Olson, J.C. (1994). *Understanding Consumer Behaviour*. Irwin, Boston, cited in Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 43

<sup>25</sup> MacInnis, D.J. and Price, L.L. (1987) The role of imagery in information processing: review and extensions. *Journal of Consumer Research* vol. 13, cited in Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 57.

With memories it is possible to make mental imagery which MacInnis and Price propose gives potentially unique effects on consumer behaviour, such as the stimulating imagery on affective experiences, purchase timing and purchase intentions.<sup>26</sup>

Knowledge and communication are also two important factors, a person's knowledge and learning process can be useful when comparing two similar products where preferences can be crucial even though the product is not yet experienced.

Communication is produced by primary (direct experience from the product), secondary (mass communication), tertiary (information obtained from travel agencies or exhibitions) and personal sources. "Tourists will actively process the information provided by the source but will not make judgements about the product based only on information; they combine it with other experiences and previous knowledge to develop attitudes and intentions and to reach a buying decision"<sup>27</sup>. In example word of mouth in a conversation produces information which consumers use in five different ways; "to evaluate alternatives in making a choice; to reinforce past choices as a rationalization process; to resolve conflict between buying and postponing; to remind them when to buy; and to acquire knowledge for epistemic (relating) purpose"<sup>28</sup>. More in-depth elements also influencing one's decisions are: personality, self-image, perception and perceived risk.

Also contributing to decision making are motivation and attitude. Answering the question 'Why do people travel?' is hard to answer but two sets of motivators are distinguished, according to Moutinho: general set and specific set.<sup>29</sup> General motivations imply that people travel for many reasons without many times knowing the motives exist, such as educational, recreational, adventure or social motives. Specific motives is when the traveller cease to be a tourist and become a searcher, looking to discover oneself, get to know different cultures, meet the psychological aura, or look in to the flora and fauna in a certain country. "Our general attitudes, interests and outlook towards life are related to our attitudes towards different kinds of vacation experiences and to what we would like to find in a vacation"<sup>30</sup>. The attitude can be either favourable or unfavourable because attitude is created from learning and experience which make the individual respond in a consistent way towards an object, such as a product.

Mental categorization means different sets of how to plan and use a strategy when making a purchase choice; this is known as the evoked set.<sup>31</sup> The evoked set have different types of sets which is helpful in the decision making, the total set, the unawareness set, the awareness set, the consideration set, infeasible set, choice set, non-choice set and the decision. These sets constitute of all possible tourist alternatives, even those the tourist is not aware of later on where only some alternatives will be considered important and then one product will be purchased.<sup>32</sup> The concept of the evoked set is when the buyer thinks of the collection of brands during the purchase decision process. Brand names, logos or trademarks encourage consumers to buy products and services because they give them the benefits they are seeking for. "These benefits range from familiarity and safety, to status and self-esteem"<sup>33</sup>, supports Horner and Swarbrooke. According to Moutinho tourism increases which will create new markets due to the changing economic conditions, new technology and changed consumer behaviour.

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<sup>26</sup>Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 60.

<sup>27</sup>Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 47.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p: 48.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p: 49.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p: 50-51.

<sup>31</sup>Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 63.

<sup>32</sup>Crompton, J. L., Ankamah P. K. 'Choice set proposition in destination decisions'. Electronic article in *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 20. Published by Pergamon Press Ltd, Oxford. 1993, p: 461-468.

<sup>33</sup>Swarbrooke, J., Horner, S. *Consumer Behaviour in Tourism*. Published by: Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, England. 1999, p:183.

Experts have foreseen ten trends; globalization, technological acceleration, peacetime war, debt wreck, re-engineered behaviour, fuelling growth, centurism and expectation, near-to-home syndrome, personal/self-focus and exploration, that will have impact on human behaviour which corporate, governmental and educational sector needs to address and respond.<sup>34</sup>

Other important external factors considered in the decision-making process are personal budget, global economy and information search. The personal budget is based on their own situation, a bad economy situation does not mean people have to sacrifice or give up their travel intentions. Searching for hotels via the Internet can provide good, cheap options and good deals are often promoted. Another important factor is the global economy, if the world economy is struggling, the companies in the travel industry suffers from it and not only during the crisis but afterward as well. According to The Digital Letter, TripAdvisor.com can make or break a destination.<sup>35</sup> The instant access to information online through reviews, blogs, accommodations, online travel agencies etcetera make people search for tips, bargains and information, all these factors affect a person's decision-making about their travel choice.<sup>36</sup>

According to tourism literature and models of travel destination choice and choice-making process, the push and pull factors are involved in the decision-making when deciding which destination to visit.<sup>37</sup> The push force (internal variables) means people are pushed away from home and generates a desire to go somewhere else. Push factors include cognitive processes and socio-psychological motivations that predispose people to travel, according to Chon.<sup>38</sup> Uysal and Jurowski say the desire of intangible products is push factors but also the desire for escape, such as adventure seeking, relaxation, socialization and prestige.<sup>39</sup> Pull factors (external forces) are those that attract an individual toward a destination once the decision to travel has been made. They stand for the want of tangible cues such as historic attractions, food, people or marketing image of the destination.

## 2.2 Six step decision making model

The six step decision making model is a rational model which is based on thinking through and adding, comparing and evaluating alternatives to bring forward the best potential result.<sup>40</sup> The model is organized to select the most logical and sensible alternative that will have the desired effect. It is a model suitable for companies to let the employees be empowered to make decisions but it is also common to teach it to children in school how to make a decision and it is useable for the rest of a person's aging. Bounded rational decision-making is when a person considers fewer options than there really is available, or when a person chooses to use the next best option which is

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<sup>34</sup>Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 12-14.

<sup>35</sup>Jeung, K.. *Does Social Media Influence Travel Decisions?* Electronic debate article in: [www.blog.thelettertwo.com](http://www.blog.thelettertwo.com). Retrieved on: 2012, 11<sup>th</sup> of May, 13.30 am. 2009.

<sup>36</sup>Math, P. *Factors Influencing Travel & Tourism Consumer Behaviour*. Electronic debate article on: [www.ehow.com](http://www.ehow.com). Retrieved on: 2012, 11<sup>th</sup> of May, 13.25 am. 2009.

<sup>37</sup>Lam, T., Hsu, C, H, C. Predicting behavioral intention of choosing a travel destination. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management vol. 27*. Published by Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2006, p: 589.

<sup>38</sup>Chon, K. S. (1989). *Understanding recreational travelers' motivation, attitudes, and satisfaction*. The Tourist Review, vol. 44, cited in Lam, T., Hsu, C, H, C. Predicting behavioral intention of choosing a travel destination. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management vol. 27*. Published by Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2006, p: 589-590.

<sup>39</sup>Uysal, M., & Jurowski, C. (1993). An empirical testing of the push and pull factors of tourist motivations. *Annals of Tourism Research, vol. 21*, cited in Lam, T., Hsu, C, H, C. Predicting behavioural intention of choosing a travel destination. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management vol. 27*. Published by Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2006, p: 589-590.

<sup>40</sup>Mc Dermot, D. (2012) *Decision making confidence*. <http://www.decision-making-confidence.com/six-step-decision-making-process.html>. Retrieved on 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2012, 19.25 pm.

not the best but the best for the current circumstances. Pros and cons exist everywhere and the six step decision-making model can become a waste of time because the process can be too long, thinking of all the details and that might lead to a delay or missed chances. The process creates the best result but it may not be the most effective one and the emphasis is on cognition and little consideration on the individual if it is a decision made by an employee. Regardless of which model to use it can be of help to improve a situation and researching all the options may rise and generate information regarded to other unrelated decisions. It may be considered that the most chaotic situation needs the most complex decision making process but it is most often the simplest solution that works. This model is seen as linear with sequential processes, meaning there are steps you need to complete before you can go to the next step. Occasionally to go further you need to go back and fully complete the last steps to proceed. There are six steps before a decision can be made and these are: “define the situation and the desired outcome, research and identify options, compare and contrast each alternative and its consequences, make a decision/choose an alternative, design and implement an action plan and evaluate results”<sup>41</sup>.

### 2.3 Electronic word of mouth (eWoM)

The predecessor to electronic word of mouth is word of mouth (WoM). Arndt, Alreck and Settle describe WoM as the communication about services and products between consumers.<sup>42</sup> At present time WoM is broadly described by the authors as “the communication between consumers about a product, service, or a company in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence”<sup>43</sup>. Westbrook points out both positive and negative feelings associated with a product experience which creates inner tension and calls for a discharge in the form of WoM.<sup>44</sup> Besides Westbrook other authors adds to these emotions, and noted that a “consumer's affective elements of satisfaction, pleasure, and sadness all motivated consumers to wish to share experiences with others”<sup>45</sup>. Simply, people are using WoM in tourism and hospitality because they are interested of sharing their travel experiences and expertise.<sup>46</sup> And to reach out to even more people with help from Internet WoM is developed into eWoM.

eWoM rose out of WoM and is defined as “all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers”<sup>47</sup>. The communication of eWoM is both between the producers and consumers as between consumers themselves. This means one person can reach another person, as millions of people at the same time. There have become both new possibilities and challenges for marketers: because of the easy access of information, eWoM can appear in big scale, which can create new dynamics in the

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<sup>41</sup>Mc Dermot, D. (2012) *Decision making confidence*. <http://www.decision-making-confidence.com/six-step-decision-making-process.html>. Retrieved on 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2012, 19.25 pm.

<sup>42</sup>Arndt, J. (1967) Role of product-related conversations in the diffusion of a new product. *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 4, and Alreck, P.L. & Settle, R.B. (1995) The importance of word-of-mouth communications to service buyers. *Proceedings of American Marketing Association*, Winter, cited in Lee, M., Youn, S. Electronic word of mouth (eWoM), How eWoM platforms influence consumer product judgment. Electronic article in: *International Journal of Advertising* vol. 28. Published by the World Advertising Research Center. 2009, p: 473.

<sup>43</sup>Litvin, S.W, Goldsmith, R.E & Pan, B. Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 29. 2008, p: 459.

<sup>44</sup> Westbrook, R. A. (1987). Product/consumption-based affective responses and postpurchase processes. *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 24, cited in Litvin, S.W, Goldsmith, R.E & Pan, B. Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 29. 2008, p: 459.

<sup>45</sup>Westbrook, R. A. (1987). Product/consumption-based affective responses and postpurchase processes. *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 24, cited in Litvin, S.W, Goldsmith, R.E & Pan, B. Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 29. 2008, p: 459.

<sup>46</sup> Litvin, S.W, Goldsmith, R.E & Pan, B. Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 29. 2008, p: 460.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid. p: 461-462.

market; with the technology greater control can be exercised and issues of people being anonymous can be of trouble if they intentionally mislead or write out-of-context messages. As time progresses, it will be more accessible to large numbers of consumers to take advice of online opinion leaders. eWoM will eventually and inevitably change the structure of travel information and also other traveller's perceptions and knowledge about various travel products.<sup>48</sup> 1/3 of the world's population are using Internet.<sup>49</sup> Travel review websites such as TripAdvisor.com are example of a website where people share their perspectives and opinions, about destinations, attractions, places, restaurants, hotels etcetera. TripAdvisor.com is the most popular travel review site with more than 60 million reviews and opinions seen by 50 million unique visitors every month.<sup>50</sup>

eWoM has become an important marketing aspect, Goldsmith and Holowitz speaks there are several unique characteristics for eWoM; eWoM occurs between people who have little or no relationship to each other which means they can be anonymous and without revealing their identity it is more comfortably to share their opinion.<sup>51</sup> This also increases the volume of eWoM which most likely makes it easier for consumers to find other consumers with product expertise on the eWoM platforms. eWoM reviews does not just exist on websites based on online reviews, it also exist on blogs, emails, instant messaging, chat rooms, etcetera.<sup>52</sup> Though it is a good idea to hear others opinion Chatterjee, Schindler & Bickart says it is more difficult to know if the information have quality and credibility because the difficulty to conclude if the information is credible people intend to use other cues to make causal inference.<sup>53</sup> Determining the quality of information has become even more difficult when marketers have started to compensate people to review a certain product and even started to review their own products.

## 2.4 Role of social media in online travel information search

Internet has fundamentally reshaped the way people search for information, uses the information and the way how to consume online. There are two notable trends which have produced a significant impact on the tourism system. Gretzel, Pan, MacLaurin and Crofts declares on the one hand, there are social media websites representing blogs, social communities, websites where you can share media files etcetera, and these increases the interest for other people's opinions, reviews and personal experiences.<sup>54</sup> Pudliner, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier expresses that Internet gives a chance for people to relive, portray and reconstruct their trips.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, searching on your own

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<sup>48</sup>Litvin, S.W, Goldsmith, R.E & Pan, B. 'Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 29. 2008, p: 462.

<sup>49</sup>Statistical information about Internet usage. <http://www.internetworldstats.com>. Information retrieved on 2012 April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 15.30 pm.

<sup>50</sup>Tripadvisor: <http://www.tripadvisor.se>. Information retrieved on 2012 April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 14.30 am.

<sup>51</sup>Goldsmith, R. E., Horowitz, D. 'Measuring Motivations for Online Opinion Seeking'. Electronic article in: *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, vol. 6. Published by: The American Academy of Advertising, Texas, USA. 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Litvin, S.W, Goldsmith, R.E & Pan, B. 'Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 29. 2008, p: 462.

<sup>53</sup>Chatterjee, P. (2001) Online review: do consumers use them? *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 28, and Schindler, R.M. & Bickart, B. (2005) *Published 'word of mouth': referable, consumer generated information on the internet*, in Haugtvedt, C.P., Machleit, K.A. & Yalch,R. (eds) *Online Consumer Psychology: Understanding and Influencing Consumer Behavior in the Virtual World*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ, cited in Lee, M., Youn, S. 'Electronic word of mouth (eWOM), How eWOM platforms influence consumer product judgement'. Electronic article in: *International Journal of Advertising* vol. 28. Published by the World Advertising Research Center. 2009, p: 474.

<sup>54</sup>Gretzel, U. (2006). *Consumer content - trends and implications for branding*. e-Review of Tourism Research, vol. 4, and Pan, B., MacLaurin, T., & Crofts, J. C. (2007). Travel blogs and their implications for destination marketing. *Journal of Travel Research*, vol. 46, cited in Xiang, Z., Gretzel, U. 'Role of social media in online travel information search'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 31. Published by Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2010, p: 179.

<sup>55</sup>Pudliner, B. A. (2007). Alternative literature and tourist experience: travel and tourist Weblogs. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, vol. 5, and Tussyadiah, I., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2009). Mediating tourist experience: access to places via shared videos.

through the huge amount of information has become a dominant manner in traveller's use of the Internet. Emarketer.com states that a recent study shows that search engines serve as the number one online information source for American families when they are planning their vacation.<sup>56</sup>

Because the lack of a formal definition, Blackshaw defines social media as "media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and achieved or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers"<sup>57</sup>. Instead of marketers and suppliers market their products to consumers online, social media is based, created, initiated and used by consumers with the intent to educate other consumer's about products, brands, services and issues according to Blackshaw and Nazzaro.<sup>58</sup>

### 3. Methods

Presenting the used methods and explaining the difference between qualitative and quantitative method.

#### 3.1 Quantitative versus qualitative methods

Quantitative methods give hard, reliable, measurable data from statistics which are often conducted through a questionnaire or survey. The researcher starts with a theory and based from this theory deduces a hypothesis; testing theories. It can be tested against reality and in the end of the process raises results and conclusions.<sup>59</sup> The quantitative method practices through norms of the natural scientific model and of positivism, according to Bryman and Bell.<sup>60</sup> The qualitative logic does not take a stand as the quantitative method does, it considers theoretical ideas and concepts are developed out of interpretations of empirical material and this is called the inductive approach; generating hypotheses. The researchers most often use observation as his or her technique and emphasize words. The aim with qualitative studies is to obtain better understanding of certain factors as in social research for understanding the world and producing knowledge about it.<sup>61</sup>

Quantitative research can cause problems because it is a method which is designed to make people's opinions generalizable. It can be discussed whether how precisely a researcher needs to be with definitions and how extended the study must be to achieve a given reliability. More criticism has been given to the quantitative methods because it lacks a clear distinction between nature and social science and some researcher also experiencing the measures to be artificial, in example that the survey has fixed alternative answers with no room for other opportunities.<sup>62</sup> Criticism is given to the

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*Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 36, cited in Xiang, Z., Gretzel, U. 'Role of social media in online travel information search'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 31. Published by Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2010, p: 179.

<sup>56</sup>Xiang, Z., Gretzel, U. 'Role of social media in online travel information search'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 31. Published by Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2010, p: 179.

<sup>57</sup>Blackshaw, P. (2006). *The consumer-generated surveillance culture*. <http://www.clickz.com/showPage.html?page=3576076>. Accessed 20th of august 2007, cited in Xiang, Z., Gretzel, U. 'Role of social media in online travel information search'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 31. Published by Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2010, p: 180.

<sup>58</sup>Blackshaw, P., & Nazzaro, M. (2006). *Consumer-generated media (CGM) 101: Word-of-mouth in the age of the web-fortified consumer*. Nielsen BuzzMetrics, New York, cited in Xiang, Z., Gretzel, U. 'Role of social media in online travel information search'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 31. Published by Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2010, p: 180.

<sup>59</sup>Bryman, A. *Social Research Methods, 3rd ed.* Published by: Oxford University Press, New York, USA. 2008, p: 140.

<sup>60</sup>Bryman, A., Bell, E. *Business research methods, 2nd ed.* Published by: Oxford University Press Inc., New York, USA. 2003, p: 28.

<sup>61</sup>Holme, I., M., Solvang, B., K. *Forskningsmetodik. Om kvalitativa och kvantitativa metoder, 2nd ed.* Published by: Studentlitteratur, Lund, Sweden. 2006, p: 94.

<sup>62</sup>Bryman, A. *Social Research Methods, 3rd ed.* Published by: Oxford University Press, New York, USA. 2008, p: 159.

qualitative research as well from other researchers because it is first and foremost difficult to rearrange the study and therefore the result is difficult to examine. The closeness that might occur can create fixed expectations which the researcher need to be aware of.<sup>63</sup> It is pointed out that the qualitative research lacks transparency, meaning you cannot ensure how the research has been done.<sup>64</sup> To reduce sampling error the preferable is to work with a large sample but as in this thesis a non-sampling error is more accurate because of its minimal number of participants, even though it is more difficult to correct or estimate if inaccuracy happens. Non-sampling error occurs out of bad formulated questions, miscoded data, interviewer bias, and respondent's misleading answers. The best strategy to minimize non-sampling error is to carefully pay attention to all aspects of the interview process; questionnaire design, coding and data entry.<sup>65</sup> When paying attention still flexibility is an important aspect to keep in mind because it is more important to get knowledge and relevant information of the phenomena than create a general structure of what is studied.<sup>66</sup>

The aim is not to generalize the research therefore I rejected quantitative methods; the aim is to analyse what people feel and react upon. It is more interesting as a researcher trying to understand others perspective, thoughts and opinions about a certain object. I consider these approaches more useful because the participants have the time to share their expertise and not just answer a survey in example the city centre with help of numbers on a scale of what they like or not like. Later on the answers are being extended and analysed by in-depth semi-structured interviews. Arguing for two similar qualitative methods is that the thesis will get more depth and understanding about the phenomena online travel reviews and it can also be a confirmation about the previous information the focus group gave which may lead to future research. Reading the analysis of the interviews, the depth is noticeable from the focus group to the semi-structured interviews which provide a richer understanding on influencing and effective reviews.

### 3.2 Validity contra reliability

Reliability and validity is in use to secure value of the research. A method should be able to be validated, in other words a method measure what it is aimed to measure. The quantitative methods are supposed to be reliable and consistent and are carrying out tests of theories that already exist and can be connected to the deductive approach and the objectivist position. Reliability and validity have mostly something to do with the actual design when it comes to qualitative research. The result often becomes an end product of the observation and this can be questioned if it is reliable. In the qualitative investigations there is a much more closeness to the object being studied; therefore validity is often more stressed.<sup>67</sup>

The distance between theory and the operational variables vary from question to question, if the theory is distant from the examined phenomena it will be harder to operationalize. An important aspect is if the investigation is fruitful in relation to the aim of the thesis. It is not feasible to directly compare an operationalization with other analyses with the same theories and other studies. The researches will declare a lot

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<sup>63</sup> Holme, I., M., Solvang, B.,K *Forskningsmetodik. Om kvalitativa och kvantitativa metoder, 2nd edt.* Published by: Studentlitteratur, Lund, Sweden. ..2006, p: 94.

<sup>64</sup>Bryman, A. *Social Research Methods,3rd edt.* Published by: Oxford University Press, New York, USA. 2008, p: 395.

<sup>65</sup>Bryman, A. *Social Research Methods,3rd edt.* Published by: Oxford University Press, New York, USA. 2008, p: 101.

<sup>66</sup> Flick, U. *Designing qualitative research.* Published by: SAGE Publications Ltd, London, England. 2007, p: 14.

<sup>67</sup> Holme, I., M., Solvang, B.,K *Forskningsmetodik. Om kvalitativa och kvantitativa metoder, 2nd edt.* Published by: Studentlitteratur, Lund, Sweden. 2006, p: 94.

different things.<sup>68</sup> It is significant to ask the question how relevant and trustworthy the gathered information is, therefore reliability and validity needs to be achieved. It is important in both the planning process and the conducting of an investigation to ask the question whether it has become any random errors or bias in the development of the issue or collection of information. Only through continuous critical scrutiny one can achieve a sufficient level of reliability and validity.<sup>69</sup>

High reliability transpires if various independent measurements of the same phenomena as this thesis tests gives the same or similar result. But reliability data is not enough, it need to be parallel with validity, meaning the theoretical variables should correspond as far as possible with the operational variable.<sup>70</sup> Validity means the study measure what it is supposed to measure and nothing else. The questions ask what is meant to be studied and therefore it becomes a reliable result.<sup>71</sup>

### 3.3 Source evaluation

To write this thesis two sources have been needed, primary and secondary sources. First, interview material was gathered and the second source is theory that fits for this study from literature and Internet.

Though behaviour is an interesting area to investigate plenty of literature has been read and that can be based upon the time limit and without having access to all exposed data. The chosen theory contributing to the thesis is the most important according to the author. The Internet sources have been revised to the extent that was possible, and more over noteworthy the time aspect of literature and Internet sources have been investigated.

### 3.4 Focus group

A focus group is respectable to collect abstract data. Hosting a small number of people responding a number of focused questions or issues will lead to deep and clarified explanations and observations of what a person means. Interviewing a whole group gives different perspectives on the same issue.<sup>72</sup> According to Smith focus groups are “used to identify issues, themes or concerns related to some topic through observing and listening to group interactions”<sup>73</sup>.

By collecting information using a focus group the data is contributing to understand social situations rather than decide that the result is generalizable. For generating results of how many people holds a certain opinion another method should be used. This is a chance to explore people’s opinions, attitudes, wishes, concerns and experiences.<sup>74</sup> The researcher is also able to study people’s different perspectives as they operate within a social network as TripAdvisor.com.<sup>75</sup> A focus group can be used in many ways and the ability to be creative, brainstorm and discuss with each other evolve information which is of importance for the result. For some participants it is better to participate saying

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<sup>68</sup> Holme, I., M., Solvang, B.,K. *Forskningsmetodik. Om kvalitativa och kvantitativa metoder, 2nd ed.* Published by: Studentlitteratur, Lund, Sweden. 2006, p: 159-162.

<sup>69</sup> Holme, I., M., Solvang, B.,K. *Forskningsmetodik. Om kvalitativa och kvantitativa metoder, 2nd ed.* Published by: Studentlitteratur, Lund, Sweden. 2006, p: 163.

<sup>70</sup> Holme, I., M., Solvang, B.,K. *Forskningsmetodik. Om kvalitativa och kvantitativa metoder, 2nd ed.* Published by: Studentlitteratur, Lund, Sweden. 2006, p: 167.

<sup>71</sup> Thurén, T. *Vetenskapsteori för nybörjare*, 2nd ed. Published by: Liber, Malmö, Sweden. 2009, p: 26.

<sup>72</sup> May, T. *Social Research, Issues, methods and process*. Published by: Open University Press, Berkshire, England. 2001, p: 126.

<sup>73</sup> Smith, S. L. J. *Practical Tourism Research*. Published by: CABI Head Office, Oxfordshire, England. 2010, p: 110.

<sup>74</sup> Flick, U. *Designing qualitative research*. Published by: SAGE Publications Ltd, London, England. 2007, p: 31.

<sup>75</sup> Kitzinger, J., Barbour, R. S. *Developing focus group research*. Published by: SAGE Publications Ltd, London, England. 1999, p: 5.

ones opinions with others than being in focus alone as in a semi-structured interview. A disadvantage can be how high the quality is on the gathered information and how the recipient judge the result. Also focus error can occur if the leader does not pay attention to what is being said; in example the discussion approaches a side track. A focus group is often arranged at a certain place which can make people less co-operative to participate because they have to transfer themselves to the place. It is of importance that the researcher thinks of the topic when he/she arrange the group, this to see how the participants encourage or suppress their point of views. By using participants with same background and cultural features it makes the group easier to operate.<sup>76</sup> Also disadvantages and advantages of moral and ethical issues are to be taken into consideration when performing a focus group. A focus group is not without high validity since the concept is easy to understand and the results are believable.

Using this kind of method the participant respond, supplementing or supporting a comment someone makes, or offering an alternative view. As Kitzinger and Barbour note the respondents are more explicitly encouraged to talk to one another.<sup>77</sup> A focus group gives valuable subjective data which might not come through if the participants have no one else to discuss with.<sup>78</sup> This qualitative method lets the interviewer see all the participants similar and different evaluations of the topic at the same time which is not the case with semi-structured interviews where it is only one person speaking. The focus group was a group of sampled participants which it made the research easier to conduct because the participants were well known with the topic.

The study of the focus group is to discover to which extent comments affect customers to change their choice of destination/hotel/attraction. The focus group produced certain keywords of how the participants read a review and how it should be stated to affect as much as possible, positively and/or negatively. These valuable factors are further questioned in the semi-structured interviews, thus hearing only one person in an interview answer the same questions can increase or reduce the focus group's credibility and/or create new fruitful insights together with the prior responses in an overall analysis.

### 3.5 Semi-structured interviews

The aim is to note the topics that occur in every interview transcript and relate the information to the research questions.<sup>79</sup> An in-depth semi-structured interview is when the interviewer tailors the interview to make it more personal and interactive. May says the interviewee's can answer more on their own terms than during a standardized interview and the interviewer can probe for more developed answers or request clarifications from the participant. Even though potential modifications during questioning can occur, it can provide the interview with a greater structure for comparability.<sup>80</sup> Fowler notes that the interviewer has the potential for influencing the quality of the data that is being collected, using three main steps: locate and secure cooperation, motivate and guide the interviewee through the questionnaire and finally ask questions in a clear, concise way.<sup>81</sup> In-depth interviews can also provide rich

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<sup>76</sup> Kitzinger, J., Barbour, R. S. *Developing focus group research*. Published by: SAGE Publications Ltd, London, England. 1999, p: 6.

<sup>77</sup> Kitzinger, J., Barbour, R. S. (1999). 'Developing focus group research'. Cited in May, T. *Social Research, Issues, methods and process*. Published by: Open University Press, Berkshire, England. 2001, p: 125.

<sup>78</sup>Smith, S. L. J. *Practical Tourism Research*. Published by: CABI Head Office, Oxfordshire, England. 2010, p: 51-52.

<sup>79</sup> Flick, U., Kardorff, V. E. & Steinke, I. *A companion to qualitative research, 1<sup>st</sup> ed.* Published by: SAGE Publications Ltd, London, England. 2004, p: 254.

<sup>80</sup>May, T. *Social Research, Issues, methods and process*. Published by: Open University Press, Berkshire, England. 2001, p: 123.

<sup>81</sup>Fowler, F. (1988). *Survey research methods*. Sage, London, cited in May, T. *Social Research, Issues, methods and process*. Published by: Open University Press, Berkshire, England. 2001, p: 100.

insights into some phenomena, such as the meaning of a tourism experience, thus to obtain more details and a better understanding of the respondent's answers.

By using semi-structured interviews the subjective viewpoint can be heard. The openness makes it easier for the interviewee to add more answers to the question. An interview can be made almost anywhere, online or at home at the participant etcetera which can make it easier for the participant to participate. A disadvantage can be that the researcher focus more on some answers than to others because these are more suitable to the research questions and therefore it won't make the study objective.<sup>82</sup>

The only way to access individual experiences from the semi-structured interviews was by the details given in the discussions in the focus group. The use of two interview methods is to produce knowledge and being able to promote solutions to this relevant problem therefore these two methods complement each other. The material is transcribed through a content analysis.<sup>83</sup> This will give the thesis primary data which will be valuable because the data has not been transcribed earlier by someone else. The approach on the coding and analysis is the one by Strauss and Corbin.<sup>84</sup> Their idea is that the researcher should be well versed in the subject he or she is studying to make it easier to suggest patterns and interpretations of the transcript. From the received personal information and contact with the interviewee it contributes together with the focus group's data to interpret how well the travel review site plays a vital role in the decision-making process.

### 3.6 Sampling

Sampling means you choose different people to participate in your study; it can be both familiar as unfamiliar participants with similar or different backgrounds and with demographic diversity. The appropriate number of participants is dependent on the research questions, time and resource limitations, how many persons you want to include to the study and which methods are used.<sup>85</sup> Criteria's for sampling can be of importance. It is a good idea to use a topic-specific sampling strategy when researching about something particular.<sup>86</sup> In this thesis the sampling participants are gathered because of their interest in travelling and that they have used TripAdvisor.com to achieve information about the destination they are going to visit. This makes it easier to use their earlier experiences to evolve knowledge about the topic and research questions during the interviews. Kitzinger and Barbour argue that there is an issue with letting people who know each other be in the same focus group.<sup>87</sup> According to market research texts the groups should consist of strangers in order to avoid both the 'polluting' and 'inhibiting' effect of existing relations between group members. Although social science researchers prefer to work with people whom are acquaintance through work or lifestyle etcetera because it is in this area people discuss the sort of issue that is being raised in the focus group. Making the setting as natural as possible is an important aspect the researcher needs to acknowledge. Using sampled people to both a focus group and interviews can make the information from their answers too similar but at the same time the answers can give difficulties to find common features if the

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<sup>82</sup> Schmidt, C. 'The analysis of semi-structured interviews' in Flick, U., Kardorff, V. E. & Steinke, I. (ed.) *A companion to qualitative research*, ed. Published by: SAGE Publications Ltd, London, England. 2004, p: 255.

<sup>83</sup>Smith, S. L. J. *Practical Tourism Research*. Published by: CABI Head Office, Oxfordshire, England. 2010, p: 50-51.

<sup>84</sup>Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Sage, Newsbury Park, California, cited in Smith, S. L. J. *Practical Tourism Research*. Published by: CABI Head Office, Oxfordshire, England. 2010, p: 118.

<sup>85</sup> Kitzinger, J., Barbour, R. S. *Developing focus group research*. Published by: SAGE Publications Ltd, London, England. 1999, p: 7.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p: 7.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p: 8.

answers are too different states Flick.<sup>88</sup> It is a fine line between fruitful information and repeating information and the result from the focus group and interviews were comparable but not homogenous which made it easier to search for themes and results to the research questions.

### 3.7 Conducting the focus group and semi-structured interviews

”Those of us who aim to understand and document others' understandings choose qualitative interviewing because it provides us with a means for exploring the points of view of our research subjects, while granting these points of view the culturally honoured status of reality”<sup>89</sup>. For this research a focus group and in-depth surveys are conducted. Primary data is collected through two methods which give access to a wide and rich array of data. May argue that generalization from sample to population is not always necessary but the criterion ”fit for purpose”<sup>90</sup> is not less important. Therefore, a non-probability sample selecting the easiest desired persons for this thesis is done. The participants are of any gender, age and nationality and the main criteria to participate are that they must have read reviews on the online review site TripAdvisor.com before they have booked their travel. The participants are not chosen randomly because this thesis is searching for people who have experience from the certain criteria above and those are targeted and asked to participate in an in-depth semi-structured interview; therefore a convenience approach is used. Convenience sampling refers to choosing people because of their accessibility, knowing they are available for interviews.<sup>91</sup> The dynamic plays a vital role creating a rich informative interview and if everyone would be similar to each other the collected data would not bring important keywords to evaluate. Recording is accepted and notes are taken.

From the author’s interest of the topic questions about it evolved. I searched the Internet for former research and found some similar work which is presented in the background chapter. From the interesting topic the research questions stated in this thesis were not shown in any other research. Questions to ask the participants grew forward and became the key factors in the interviews. All of the interviews were conducted with the same questions.

Collecting data from the focus group was during an hour on the morning of April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012 with four participants from Poland, Serbia, Greece and Finland - Martyna, Katarina, Kostas and Eljas. Some data about the topic was given the evening before the meeting thus because of letting the participants consider the topic. Further data and knowledge were assigned at the point of the interview. The importance of the dynamic answers from the participants makes the result important for analysis and not at least interesting for further research.

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with Justiina from Finland, Mikael and Emy from Sweden and Vasco from Portugal, two personal and two interviews via Skype was performed on the 10<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of May, 2012. Two of the semi-structured interviews was conducted via Skype without video, thus made it challenging to notice reactions towards the questions, but questions which were misunderstood or needed a clarification was observed by both and were carefully enlightened. A prerequisite of insecurity in their voice was quickly adverted to ask if the question needed explanation.

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<sup>88</sup> Flick, U. *Designing qualitative research*. Published by: SAGE Publications Ltd, London, England. 2007, p: 29.

<sup>89</sup>May, T. *Social Research, Issues, methods and process*. Published by: Open University Press, Berkshire, England. 2001, p: 127.

<sup>90</sup>May, T. *Social Research, Issues, methods and process*. Published by: Open University Press, Berkshire, England. 2001, p: 95.

<sup>91</sup>Smith, S. L. J. *Practical Tourism Research*. Published by: CABI Head Office, Oxfordshire, England. 2010, p: 92.

The face to face interviews were calm and gave thoughtful responses and the opportunity to feel free to speak. The meetings through Skype were more difficult to conduct because paradigms such as feeling stress to answer quickly and/or the feeling of a need to evolve the answers may have been an impact on the answers. But in the end the answers were fruitful.

This was not the first time I met the participants and that brought both advantages and disadvantages as taken up above in 3.4 Focus group. Also the focus group members knew each other before. Six of the participants have studied tourism earlier which may show both similarities and contrasts in their answers such as how to think and answer from what they have learnt under and during their tourism education but also contrasts such as their personal opinion though they are from different countries and have different cultural backgrounds. Relating this thesis on a tourism topic does not mean a tourism education was needed for anyone of the participants but it made it easier to conduct the interviews because the participants studied in the same class or had been studying together with the author. People knowing each other in advance may inadvertently omit important details because they already know each other's opinions about certain things and then they think it is of no interest of telling it to the others. But stated by the participants their presence was to share as much of their opinions and thoughts as possible. Due to the time limit it was more functional asking friends to participate, my point of view is that their answers are more trustworthy and they probably, more naturally, dared to express their feelings, more than if the group would have been total strangers to each other. Even with our "friend zone" they knew this was for research which made them alert on giving comprehensive answers. Also their notion about tourism and marketing might have made it easier for them to acknowledge the subject. Even if the seventh person lacked tourism education the answers were as important as the other ones. Opinions, attitudes, thoughts and perspective are studied in the interviews about influential online reviews. The interview questions can be viewed in 8.1 Appendix 1 – Interview questions to focus group and semi-structured interviews.

The author's role for both the focus group and the semi-structured interviews was to ask questions without trying to influence the participants to answer in a certain way. For the focus group the most important thought was letting the participants use an open dialogue. By only nodding when portraying "OK" or "carry on talking" to show attention and without letting them start talking about a different topic. As it is the participant in the focus group who is ordained to talk and discuss with each other intervening was not an option before it was necessary. In example due to the time and/or when the discussion was about to end an interference to make it continue by asking another question was done. Their body language was calm and when they explained their experiences they painted their words with their hands by showing gesticulations and signs.

During the semi-structured interviews the leader role was different, the idea was to interact more with the participant to make him or her feel like "home" and to make them feel secure to be able to speak freely. It is not only difficult for the participants to elaborate their feelings, thus as an interviewer I need to stay focused. "The researcher is seen as the subject and the thing being researched is taken to be the object, but in social science we are both the subject and object of our knowledge. When we study social life we are also studying ourselves. So, we have to find a way of assessing evidence from everyday experience"<sup>92</sup>. This gives the ability to choose between dismissing everyday experience as irrelevant or being able to self-consciously embrace it and use it fruitfully

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<sup>92</sup>Smith, M. J. *Social science in question*. Published by: SAGE Publications, London, England. 1998, p: 7.

to gain new understandings in social existence that would otherwise remain unnoticed.

The main idea conducting a focus group was to gather data of their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and opinions towards a tourism product or service mentioned in an online review site. Therefore the questions were based on interesting keywords dominating the author's perceptions when thinking of electronic word of mouth and online review sites: online reviews, social media, trustfulness, time changing, responding attitude and virtual data versus real life. The author's idea culminated in questions which created and developed the thesis aim.

From these keywords new keywords occurred out of the focus group interview: trust, "regular" reviewer, critical view, and reference group, and empowered people, time line for reviews, responding action and changing decision. These were transferred to the semi-structured interviews letting them answer the questions too.

Five online reviews with different aspects from TripAdvisor.com was shown to the participants which was to evaluate what they thought of the reviews, how they formulated their personal opinions about the review and what the review contributed to them. This will answer the research questions. The empirical material will be inspected on how much one is affected by an online review.

Conducting some of the semi-structured interviews without seeing each other increased the feature of both the interviewer and the respondent to speak truthfully and because of the familiarity this were not an obstacle. Letting one person without a tourism education (being a student was not required to be included in the interviews) background participate in a semi-structured interview was to see if the person had other opinions regarding reviews online but it showed no such signs and his thoughts were not out of the norm, thus as important. It is noted that having an interest for travelling these sites are useful.

The comprehensive analysis of the interview resulted in keywords. Which are important when reading online reviews and they have been lying as features in the participant's subconscious. First and foremost trust is most important, feeling the trust in the online review strengthen the image and expectations to go to the destination. The online reviews need to have arguments to make it trustworthy. A review should be written by a "regular person" and not a paid reviewer. Thus it is more important to be subjective and honest than "objective" and try to sell the product or service through online reviews. Even if the participants (potential travel consumers) does not know who the person is behind the review the consumer expects dignity from the writer to be himself/herself.

Not without significance a critical view is also considerable, what and how are crucial features in the review when reading to consider it in the decision-making process. It may not be easy to understand which reviews are truly written and which are painted but products and services with only good words and no arguing why gives warning signs. With a critical eye when viewing reviews is the best way to stand ground against the non-trustworthy information sources. Satisfaction is a vital factor, the information the people gather must comply with the expectations the potential consumer had in the beginning. As much as people want personal contact their interest also lies in talking with and/or read what strangers have to say.

According to the participants in the focus group there is no need for the online review writer to be responded but if they will get an answer it would be above their

expectations. This shows the need and/or wanting to have personal interaction with the companies they are reviewing or at least thoughts from other consumers.

What has been noticed as a theme throughout the interviews is that eWoM is a fun, an important way to gain knowledge of a place you want to visit and this is of great value when a person wants to encourage someone to buy a journey. According to Werthner “the tourism product has to do with emotional experiences; it is not just business”<sup>93</sup>.

Through the interviews it emerged information that TripAdvisor.com is a useful tool if you want to look at something completely new. Understandable of all reviews is that friends and families opinions are strong. Online reviews and reference groups complement each other.

Online reviews from TripAdvisor.com were shown to the participants and their reactions became more personal. Seeing these reviews their focus moved slightly from what was argued in the review to the review in its whole. The observation from the focus group was that they used the online reviews as “top information” as an element to make a decision. But in the end of the interview the participants gave a contradictory answer, an example of what is meant is when Kostas answer “all information which comes across my attention can affect (in a way) my expectations and the picture I have for a destination but not really my decision”.

Interesting facts are that some of the participants did not care about the online reviews in the sense of being the factor that can change a person’s decision or image. Even if they were to encounter negative or positive online reviews and why so can be explained by Linton “no matter how carefully the individual has been trained or how successful his conditioning has been, he remains a distinct organism with his own needs and with capacities for independent thought, feeling and action”<sup>94</sup>. It is concluded that the online reviews are interesting to read and provides satisfaction. They are seen as a help to find new interesting places, give knowledge and experience of an area, strengthen an image or give a warning sign which may or not may be taken into consideration. Sivadas, Methat and Jones investigated the buying distinction between shopping and specialty products.<sup>95</sup> People whom have an open search tend to read a lot about the product or service but it does not need to create a buying decision. For people searching for something special it is a limited search process going on and is not interested of comparing brands before buying the product. This approach can be transmitted to the customers in the tourism industry based on the participant’s answers where online review search is a enormous part before they tend to travel even though it is not a the final factor in the decision making.

### **3.8 Limitations**

Although this research was carefully prepared, there were some limitations.

The thesis time limit focuses on one focus group and four interviews. Extending the time more surveys could have been done. Second, one particular travel review site is mentioned out of many to narrow the investigation. Third, preparing a more extensive paper would have cost money to interest more people to participate and therefore the

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<sup>93</sup> Werthner, H. *Intelligent systems in travel and tourism*. Published by: e-commerce and tourism research lab, Trento, Italy. 2001, p: 1.

<sup>94</sup> Usunier, J-C. *Marketing across cultures, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* Published by: Pearson Education Asia Pte Ltd, Jurong, Singapore. 2000, p: 4.

<sup>95</sup> Sivadas, E., Mehtat, R., Jones, M. ‘Consumer Behavior in Online Auctions: An exploratory Study’, article in: Haugtvedt, C. P., Machleit, K. A., Yalch, R. F. (ed.) (2005). *Online Consumer Psychology. Understanding and Influencing Consumer Behaviour in the Virtual World*. Published by: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, London, England. 2005, p: 424.

thesis is of this limit.

## **4. Empirical material**

The research questions are answered by the participants in the empirical material. This informative text is the result of the focus group and semi-structured interviews answers.

### **4.1 The study of online reviews effects**

The empirical material indicates the most value adding pieces from the interviews that have been transcribed which gives answers to the research questions. The focus group and the semi-structured interviews are intertwined to each other to make it more readable.

The interviews started with questions about the participants travelling, why they travel and what made them develop their interest in travelling. All the answers were based on: writing truthfully and sincere and reviews written by “regular” people (regular meaning non journalists) may create a trustful online review. Reading with a critical eye or the belonging to a group from where a person has written an online review is more trustworthy than a review from anyone else. The time aspect of how long the review have existed and how much have happened since it was written. And from the respectful way a personnel answer the reviews to how the reviews can make one change once mind. This data is to provide an understanding of their interest in tourism, what they think is important, expects and how online reviews influence them.

### **What makes a person choose to use online reviews in the decision making process when considering a destination?**

Having fun, being on an adventure, meet new people and cultures, learning about the world and understand it are important aspects of why the participants travel. With help from their imagination, earlier memories, external factors and personal choices make the journey perhaps more comfortable, interesting and adventurous. To find the most suitable destination for a person all the factors written above needs to be taken into consideration. Today’s culture is all about knowledge and that is what you get (collected information) from the Internet which a person later on is going to use when heading out in the world, declares Justina. Their experiences since they were young have coloured their way of thinking about travelling. How, where and when to travel without making the same “faults” their parents did, makes the participants more likely to create new better customs how to travel and therefore they use online reviews as help in the decision-making process. When Mikael was young and travelled with his family and friends they often went to high standard hotels with all-inclusive in Turkey. These early experiences have influenced his choice of how to travel and how to stay overnight when he is on vacation. Off course it is not only earlier experiences that helps creating a choice, it is also the development of Internet and social media. Eljas gave an example of when his parents visited him in England, which was an awful experience because the hotel was overbooked and had no room for his parents for the period of their stay. The hotel, which was to blame, had to arrange at least one overnight stay in another hotel until the first hotel found out what happened with their booking. When they arrived to the second hotel they had not been informed of this transfer so they were sent back to their primary hotel again. This incident which stressed them all made Eljas from that day on be careful when he chooses hotel in the future. Looking back to this memory has made him search for more information which may or may not give similar histories. This may be listed in one or more online reviews on TripAdvisor.com which shows how

structured and satisficing a hotel is and it is important to add in ones selection while you are in the decision-making process.

Searching for online reviews is good and gives different perspective of a destination. Positive, negative or interesting online reviews can all be fruitful in the decision-making process. The information can bring both general and specific data, it all depends on what you are looking for. It is a direct comfort to make the participants decision-making process easier. Mikael argues that TripAdvisor.com has made it possible for people to visit places they were unsecure of or also new alternatives may have been considered. Other factors such as money, time, weather, etcetera are all playing a vital role when the participants choose a destination.

The participants use online reviews because they believe at least most of the reviews are written by “regular” people and not by paid reviewers. Online reviews from “regular” people give an honest impression and a subjective view which is purposely not made for everyone to share as if it would have been an advertising online review which is supposed to attract a large amount of people with different taste. Emy talks of if destinations online review on TripAdvisor.com is to be trustworthy there should be both good and bad arguments and not only fantastic ones. Justiina points out that this website is an opportunity to see another ones “reality and perspective”. Deliberating (whom to trust) between a website with promotional texts about the destination and online reviews on an independent website, the most important aspect is to see the average subjectively between positive and negative online reviews. Also relevance and when it was written will be of help when deciding what text to trust. The reviews that are written of paid reviewers or journalists will never become unbiased or give an impartial opinion. It will most likely make people purchase unwanted products and make them less satisfied. Therefore, this online travel review site with millions of reviews can give a better confirmation on validity than a company’s own website with reviews.

You never know when a person is “sent from inside” a hotel therefore Martyna believe websites with a clear focus on group belonging gives more trustworthy information. But Katarina is of another opinion because it depends on what the person is looking for, scanning for words that are interesting and gives the impression of liking the same things or activities as I do, then it is most of the times a satisficing review. Spending time looking for online reviews written about one’s interest is important. The person behind the online review does not have to “feel” similar to one self as long as the review is argumentative. It is interesting to read about a person’s expectations and attitude and compare it with one self’s preferences. Having the same “wants and needs” in the online reviews continue to catch my attention tells Vasco. Mikael is affected and influenced by reviews with strong arguments based on why he should not go there even if he has collected more both negative and positive online reviews from other sources. The more other people writes negative reviews it outweigh other impressions because of the sincerity and hopefully helpfulness.

Just because the consumers are being empowered with deciding and arguing which product and service is good or bad, it does not mean the destination/hotel/attraction etcetera needs to give attention to it. But it can give extra marketing credit for the company if someone from the personnel responds on the online reviews. According to Kostas every person having a connection within hospitality and service need different approach to feel satisfied, some reviewers want an answer from a responsible person from the destination whom answers the review and some are satisfied just expressing what they feel without a reply. Eljas has written reviews and he is not supposing an

answer but if he will be responded it would exceed his expectations. This specific reply can provide “value to the consumer” when having an answer on their negative or positive written review. Answering one or every online review belonging to the specific destination can save a reputation, make a person who reads reviews acknowledge the importance the destination think of its customers by answering and it may also give improvement to the quality of the destination when they read what their customers think of them and in return it will be better for their customer. Martyna argues that complaining’s in example about direct events should be brought up on place and not later online. Indirect incidents may be brought up so readers can create an imagination of what is happening on the intended travel destination. Since Internet became an important aspect of a person’s everyday life it is important to hear what other people think, in example of what is good, bad, modern, old, right or wrong. Katarina adds that she think it is much nicer to read articles in magazines but it is more realistic to read online reviews. The idea of using online reviews as help means the potential consumer can fill the empty information gap that the marketing does not want to tell or show.

### **What attitude has potential consumers to online reviews?**

The interviews continued by asking all of the participants to read five different reviews and explain what they assumed and understood out of the reviews which were collected from TripAdvisor.com on 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, 2012. The online reviews were collected from two negative, two positive and one split review of The Eiffel tower in Paris, Hohenschönhausen Memorial Centre (Stasi prison museum) in Berlin and the Red Light District in Amsterdam. In Appendix 9.2 all of the reviews are organized and in full statement.

The first two online review states that the Eiffeltower is a “bunch of metal” with a “phallic shape”, the service was poor and the whole system around the Eiffeltower was bad organized. The two negative online reviews about the Eiffel tower did not give as much information as wanted. According to Katarina “metal junk” is not arguable in a review. Martyna thinks that the basic facts that were complaint about the Eiffel tower people should know this because of its popularity, it is a main attraction were for instance long queues can occur. And it was written with an angry tone therefore it is not acceptable to believe this review. According to Mikael it gave the feeling of that the person had heard a lot about the place and built up an expectation, an expectation ruined when the person visited. Hence what the other persons said, it looks good on the outside but the inside is not impressive. An idea is when the personnel sees these comments they should improve their service and prices but at the same time they know what status the Eiffeltower have and probably won't notice and care about the reviews. Justiina says these two are decreasing the Eiffeltowers image she thinks. But sometimes attractions are less worth seeing and it is just their name that is the pull factor that you have to visit because of its popularity. When starring at the online reviews it makes us search for faults and not what we think of online reviews in general, states Eljas.

You can “feel” and “see” the pulse of history in the hidden prison and a “walk down memory lane” is something every visitor to Berlin needs to do. It is a “terrible” place where you can learn more about history and how the prisoners were treated during the stasis control in the East German dictatorship. It is “frightening” as back in 1989 and not much has been changed since. It is a “very well made memorial site”. The two positive reviews gave a better background and arguing why this was an attraction you should not miss. One was realistic and factual written and the other one just presented a positive, calmly and trustworthy atmosphere, according to Katarina. Mikael says the

positive reviews give you the impression of wanting to go back and feel the wings of history and see how the prisoners during the Cold War were treated. A realistic review like this one creates positive marketing for the destination, knowing their attraction is valuable to other historically and culturally interested people, states Vasco.

Going in to the red light district makes you feel “followed” and you are afraid of the people who work there because they “accused you of stealing there money” and they were not letting you go wherever you tried to go. From this area the online review tells you not to go to the country at all. Emy argues that even if it is a negative review it “warns” others who are interested of going there and therefore it is at the same time positive. Katarina believes this kind of online reviews should be inclined towards the government and not the area with its companies. Justiina states that this online review was unnecessary because it adds a mark on the entire country which the online review not was arguing about. Main attractions in a country often have an indication of what the attraction is, why it exists and what people expects from it. Therefore bad written reviews like this one should be thought through twice before it is written because people don’t read it with seriousness, expresses Vasco.

Not only looking at the details that the attitude towards online reviews is good it also gives an opportunity to learn more and not only believes what is being written in an article, states the focus group and the interviewee’s. It gives the person who reads them a chance to create a personal picture if the reviews are of any assistance or not. Internet has opened the door for two way communication which shrinks the selection of making a wrong decision. People and companies are allowed to share information, good or bad and also agree with someone or defend themselves. The participants in both the focus group and semi-structured group are all grateful to Internet and the development that has taken place. Martyna argues that she mostly read special online communities reviews because they share her interest for climbing but online reviews on travel websites are of interest as well but it is not the most important ones. Even though Internet brings many bad things it also bring good things, speaks Katarina. The effect which online reviews possess is a powerful force, it gives true, false or relative preference which potential consumers observe or conform to.

### **How do online reviews stand up against word of mouth in affecting a person’s decision-making?**

Word of mouth is how communication began and the development from it is electronic word of mouth. Mikael states the two communication ways are very similar, the difference is that you can collect more information online and may understand a bigger picture of the greater whole. Everything is sampled and you are given more alternatives than by a friend. Some of the participants are more influenced by family and friends instead of online reviews and this is because trust exists on another level than the trust to an anonymous person online. Today both ways to search for information is important, they are combined to help each other and give the potential consumer the most suitable outcome. Vasco believes word of mouth and electronic word of mouth appeals to different kinds of people. If a person have made up his mind electronic word of mouth will overcome because of the easy access of information and some people are traditionally bound and asks people in his surroundings.

TripAdvisor.com are compared and combined with other sites, as websites with rating systems and in example a hotels guestbook with reviews from earlier customers on their homepage. A negative online review cannot affect the decision but it might affect the

decision-making process and likewise with negative information given by a friend or family. It is more believable to shorten the decision-making process if a family or friend gives a positive review of a destination as their negative review can prolong the process, states Justiina. She continues by arguing that positive online reviews don't have the same effect to shorten the process and neither prolongs the decision-making, instead it can erase an alternative when many people argues about the same entity. In the end it is one's own choice and not family, friends or online reviews who decide if a person want to go to a certain destination, states Mikael.

### **To which degree affects online travel reviews the decision making of a destination?**

When a person have decided where to go or at least have options of destinations to choose between the person use TripAdvisor.com as a substitute for more person's personal reflections and opinions. Martyna point toward that people use friends and family for advice, website with a search engine for overall information and specific online reviews as a confirmation. Today all these method of advices are important by choosing the most acceptable alternatives and buy the most suitable service/journey.

An interesting aspect from reading the online reviews is how they are written, argumentative, with few words, positive or negative. An online review should declare as much as possible with a serious tone whether it is a good, bad or mixed review. According to the participants in the semi-structured interview the reviews which capture attention first and foremost are the negative ones and this because of its relevance. When searching for information about a destination you are interested of wanting to know what happens, Justiina declares. In the starting phase for the consumer of choosing a destination they all sounds great and it is with a positive image a person think of a place and without having too high expectations which may fall apart later on. With online reviews written by anyone it gives a good overview to "check out the situation" of the region, Mikael explains. According to former research the affirmation to see both positive and negative reviews are most trustworthy for the product people are reading online reviews about. It doesn't matter how many online reviews that exists, it is all about many people agreeing on something which indulges the credibility, enunciate Eljas.

Katarina thinks of the average online reviews as the best ones because they are informative. They explain the destination with both positive and negative arguments because they have been written with an open mind. If it is a too happy or too bad review the reviewer often don't provide the whole picture of the journey, states Katarina. Even if different feelings occur while thinking of online reviews and how they affect one all participants agrees that it is much better now to communicate with whomever, whenever and where ever than in the beginning of the Internet era. This can create great malice or boosting for a company in today's fast online speed. Consistently for the participants is that online review sites is all about trustful texts and having a critical view to use it.

Being affected of online reviews depends on different factors. The trust of a review lies in the time aspect, what people consider is written long time ago is subjective but for the participants no longer than a year is accepted. Vasco says that if it is a new place the first online reviews about it would not get any attention from him because the hotel haven't got or had the time to create a reputation. Living in a fast pace world where everything is changing quickly and people want to know and have everything directly, makes it important for destinations with their companies and hotels to be seen and marketed by their customers through online reviews. The potential consumers are being

demanding and therefore they search for as much information as possible and to the extent that it is a crucial factor when making their decision, states Katarina. These small details are a part of a person's decision-making process, and the degree of use is that they read and take the news into consideration.

Mikael states that small parts inside the whole in example a negative online review for a hotel can make him change hotel but not change destination. Information which catches the attention can affect someone's expectations and images of the destination, says Kostas. The degree of use of online reviews is high when it involves in example external factors but when it comes to affect the final decision the degree of use is low. Kostas argues that an online review can be of support as much as a conversation but close to the decision the traditional dialogue is the strongest and most trustworthy exchange when it comes to make a final decision. Justiina mention how she and her friend changed hotel on their planned destination because they had heard negative things about it but they kept the destination.

## 5. Analysis

This part will analyse the empirical material with benefit of literature. The result consists of statements from the participants in the surveys. To make it easier to follow the analysis the empirical material is related with the four main categories in the theoretical framework and with the research questions.

The participants are using different starting points when they are in their decision-making process, personal qualifications which need to fit into the decision so the foremost destination is chosen. The theories used in this paper are based on decision-making points from different authors which are all used when the participants make a choice and this is what the empirical material shows. According to Sirikaya and Woodside not one single decision theory is the best because all of them have different points of view how to make the most satisfying or optimal decision to be made.<sup>96</sup>

This paper displays that people who want to travel use Internet and social media as immense influence in their decision-making process. Because of this new market<sup>97</sup>, Moutinho utters that a person chose from a set of available alternatives<sup>98</sup>, not only one and for the participants the choices are numerous. Because of the many alternatives today's travellers have, the interviews have shown that bounded rationality is the alternative that gives the emotions you want to feel. For Martyna it is like this, searching and using communities with the same interests as her first and foremost and thereafter other information sources as TripAdvisor.com:s reviews.

Moutinho predicted Internets development and it has become a word of mouth world, where people can discharge their opinions with help from now day's electronic word of mouth. The investigation of this paper notifies that electronic word of mouth can stand up against word of mouth in the decision making process. Chatterjee, Schindler & Bickart consider that it is difficult to know if the information have quality and credibility but the participants use a critical view before they use the retrieved information. The participants don't leave any source of information infringed and their

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<sup>96</sup>Sirakaya, E., Woodside, A. G. 'Building and Testing Theories of Decision Making by Travellers'. Article in: *Tourism Management* vol. 26. Published by: Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2004, p: 816.

<sup>97</sup> Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 12-14.

<sup>98</sup> Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 41.

choices are based on the six step decision model<sup>99</sup>, theories<sup>100</sup> and sets<sup>101, 102</sup>.

Communication and knowledge are two important aspects for the participants; they compare destinations and combine their aim with their expectations. Same goes for destinations that need to communicate and create positive marketing to be chosen (even if it is not yet experienced). As Chon says the push factor is strong, writing an online review in an interesting way can make any person interested to go to that place.<sup>103</sup> The transparency on the Internet makes it easier to come to a decision but the more difficult it is for businesses knowing what is to come and what choices an individual makes. The research also indicates that the participants combine information sources. Motivation is a key factor to satisfaction. Therefore they need to search for many alternatives which make the attitude towards online reviews positive and make them useful to a certain degree in the decision process.<sup>104</sup> "Our general attitudes, interests and outlook towards life are related to our attitudes towards different kinds of vacation experiences and to what we would like to find in a vacation"<sup>105</sup>, that is why individuals use more than only life experience and references when collecting alternatives to make a decision.

Emarketer.com<sup>106</sup> states that search engines are the first step to use when searching for information to make a travel decision and that is also what Martyna uses when the first thought of travelling occurs. The online information can be seen as an education between individuals and it is for people who wish to have control over their decisions. Social media<sup>107</sup> is based, created and used by consumer with the intent to share knowledge about services and products etcetera; therefore it is a huge part of the participant's everyday life.

## 6. Conclusion and result

The aim was to research how much online reviews affects a decision making and prior to this thesis the aim is fulfilled. The investigation gives a wide perspective of how the participants considers during the decision-making process until the final decision.

Service products are intangible which makes them different from time to time and therefore it is of interest to read what other thought of the same service as the participants are attracted to. The use of social media and its online reviews provides new perspectives on a destination you have or have not had an image of earlier. It provides a greater freedom to make a choice that suits the individual. Studying online reviews makes the time before, during and after the journey more comfortable, interesting and evokes satisfaction. Our time-culture involves making use of the Internet in our daily life and work. There is really no free choice whether to use the Internet or

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<sup>99</sup>Mc Dermot, D. (2012) *Decision making confidence*. <http://www.decision-making-confidence.com/six-step-decision-making-process.html>. Retrieved on 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2012, 19.25 pm.

<sup>100</sup>Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 49.

<sup>101</sup>Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 63.

<sup>102</sup>Richarme, M. *Consumer Decision-Making Models, Strategies, and Theories, Oh My!* Published by: Decision Analyst, Arlington, Texas, USA. Retrieved on: 2012, 30<sup>th</sup> of August, 16.00 am. 2005, p: 1-2.

<sup>103</sup>Chon, K. S. (1989). *Understanding recreational travelers' motivation, attitudes, and satisfaction*. The Tourist Review, vol. 44, cited in Lam, T., Hsu, C, H, C. Predicting behavioral intention of choosing a travel destination. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management vol. 27*. Published by Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2006, p: 589-590.

<sup>104</sup>Moutinho, L. *Strategic Management in Tourism*. Published by: Wallingford: CAB International, Wallingford, England. 2000, p: 47.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p: 50-51.

<sup>106</sup>Xiang, Z., Gretzel, U. 'Role of social media in online travel information search'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management vol. 31*. Published by Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2010, p: 179.

<sup>107</sup>Blackshaw, P., & Nazzaro, M. (2006). *Consumer-generated media (CGM) 101: Word of-mouth in the age of the web-fortified consumer*. Nielsen BuzzMetrics, New York, cited in Xiang, Z., Gretzel, U. 'Role of social media in online travel information search'. Electronic article in: *Tourism Management vol. 31*. Published by Elsevier Ltd, Amsterdam, Holland. 2010, p: 180.

not because products with information which have existed in physical form is more often transferred into digital form where the businesses can meet their potential customers 24 hours per day.

The attitude towards online reviews is located both on the retail level and on the overall level and the participants see them as commercial awareness. The perspective plays a vital role in the decision making but it does not make any difference if it is positive or negative because both approaches helps to come closer to a specific alternative (destination) or the decision. In this paper communication is an important factor since it is a driving force behind the online reviews. The feeling the participants communicate in the paper is that online reviews are a favorable digital marketing base. The travel review site provides new knowledge and increase the visibility of a destination. And it provides a strong competition in the decision making against reference groups and other marketing. The online reviews strengthen the consumption power of a person who is interested in buying and the positive attitude towards online reviews reduces alternatives of wrong decisions.

The thesis shows that for some individuals eWoM stand up against WoM when it comes to choose. The answers are not the same because the participants' background is different from each other's. Understood from the interviews the participants whom not put as much emphasis behind eWoM as WoM are the persons with a closer relationship to their family and reference group when it comes to listen to advice. This is based on their religion where the younger ones will listen to the elderly and this may be the basis for future research on religion in touch with social media. The human contact with online reviews cannot be removed because in one way or another, different pieces (physical or digital) are added or matched in order for a purchase to occur. The best way to learn about the service or product is with many information sources. The Internet with social media and online reviews provides access to all to share their opinions, for example, people from various social classes share opinions with each other, people who had never spoken to each other if it were not for social media to express themselves or opinions that never otherwise have been highlighted are online.

Consistently from literature and the empirical material it is shown how much eWoM is used in people's everyday life. In terms of the totality of decisions help from social media online reviews, they have not the final word when a selection is made, but go into the details of the potential journey the online reviews can replace in example a hotel or a visit to a restaurant on the destination you want to go to. The participants don't us the online reviews as the last act but they use it during the process to produce the most satisfying travel alternatives. The most spectacular thing is how much the online reviews are used but still not strong enough to encourage the final decision.

The purpose of this thesis was not to generalize how much influence online reviews have in the decision process. The participants' common denominator is that online reviews on the whole is not as important as references opinions or his own words, but the information one reads gives a greater overall impression and greater knowledge when making their choice. As a contributing factor to why people rely more on a person in one's proximity than an online review on the Internet may be that you get no impression of that person so that security does not appear as easily as with a friend or a relative. The online reviews dominate in such a way that the participants can change details in their journey. The subjects in the study indicates that when it comes to decisions that affect service and travel (tourism) you want to be informed and hence makes use of online reviews which makes the apparent result fruitful. The thesis result

strengthens the online reviews impact on individuals and for that reason it can be said that online reviews dominates a part of a person's mindset.

## **6.1 Future research**

The paper has provided interesting new research that can be studied. When all the participants felt that online reviews are influential, a quantitative study can examine whether the results can be generalized. And it can show how strong competitive online reviews is towards marketing. Another interesting issue to research in the future is how the trust of an online review can become a stronger persuasion than someone's word from the reference group.

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## 8. Appendix

### 8.1 Appendix 1 – Interview questions to focus group and semi-structured interviews.

- What factors have developed your interest for travelling?
- How do you choose your destination, are you open-minded or you want to plan in advance?
- Describe which factors affect your choice of destination? Friends, weather, images? Why?
- What is your opinion about the phenomena review sites?
- What experiences have you gained through review sites?
- Do the review sites affect your choice of destination?
- How do you choose your destination, what affects your choice?
- How are the reviews useful for you?
- Why do you choose to read comments?
- Do you trust the comments, discuss how you think and feel when you read them?
- Are there comments that have caught your suspicious eye? Why?
- Due to the fast changes globally, what is your opinion about new and older reviews, are they worth the same?
- Is the newest comment the most important to you? How much is time worth.
- Is it important review sites and social media exist to spread information? Why?
- Which review site do you prefer to seek information from?
- If the choice of destination is relatively unknown for you, do you put more trust in the comments?
- What is most important on review sites? (many members, that it quickly updates, comments verified from someone else by clicking Yes this is true etcetera)
- What is your opinion and feeling when comments are only positive, do they affect you to choose i.e. this particular hotel/attraction?
- What is your opinion and feeling when comments are only negative, do they affect you to choose another i.e. this particular hotel/attraction?
- Should the i.e. hotel manager respond to every review?
- How do you perceive i.e. the hotel/attraction if no personnel respond on their comments?
- Is it important to show to you and other customers no matter what positive or negative reviews they have got they should reply with an answer?
- Are you engaging in these sites and writes comments? Yes, no – why?
- What feelings do you feel after have written a comment? (power?)
- What does it mean to you being able to share your knowledge?
- What advantages is there on writing reviews?
- What disadvantages is there on writing reviews?
- What does your decision-making process look like?
- Explain your decision making process.

## 8.2 Appendix 2 – Online reviews

1. “Honestly it’s a bunch of metal in a rather phallic shape. I don’t get it and was not impressed.”
2. “Great attraction from outside. What is new..? the rest was lousy. Long lines. Unacceptable service. Sloooooow elevators. Boring stores. Cold temperature. Cero visibility. Overpriced. Smelly. Bad organized.”
3. “You can feel and vividly see every bit of political torture in this ex-stasi prison. Find a time in your Berlin visit and schedule this trip down to this memorial. Orwell's 1984 will haunt you for sure.”
4. “This is a must see. Terrible, how dissidents were treated in the East German dictatorship. Makes you think and value much more freedom and democracy. The place has not been changed a lot since 1989 but remains just as frightening as it was. Very well done memorial site”.
5. “Every time I stepped in the red light district some drug addict followed me the whole way time demanding money, not just coins but they wanted the cash, they would not leave no matter what I tried to do, going in stores, going to heavily crowded areas, all that did was get them to shout "give me back my money" don’t waste your time going to this [--] hole of a country.”