**Doctoral School of
Business Administration**

SUMMARY OF THESES

Éva Markos-Kujbus

Electronic word-of-mouth as a marketing communications tool

The information role of consumer opinions in the case of TripAdvisor

Ph.D. dissertation

Supervisor:

Dr. Dóra Horváth, Ph.D.
Associate Professor

Budapest, 2017

Department of Marketing, Media, and Design Communications

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Contents

I. Preliminaries and aims of the study

The topic of the present dissertation is in-depth study of the role in marketing communications of a specific manifestation of the phenomenon of consumer participation, namely electronic word-of-mouth, or e-WOM[1]. E-WOM was chosen as a focal topic for the dissertation following the observation that using it efficiently for marketing communications purposes is impossible without having a detailed knowledge of all stages of the process (Cheung – Thadani, 2012). It is important to note that even though the dissertation deals with a process taking place in the digital environment, the core phenomenon of word-of-mouth is hardly a novelty; it, however, requires an adapted examination in a new environment and along new angles.

A detailed study of the process of e-WOM is equally necessary as technological change is at the origin of many aspects of a restructuring of the practice of marketing communications. The digital communication space brings about a particularly complex environment for organizations, radically changing the characteristics of communication by dramatically increasing the number of participants in the process. Along with the transforming communication space, consumer's communication habits and expectations are equally evolving, while organizations are losing their dominant position as sources of information. Many signs today indicate that organizations' influencing power has deeply suffered in the process, even though the new communication channels have opened up new avenues for reaching consumers in more targeted ways.

The new (virtual) space can be characterized by an extensive social connectivity, and online consumers by a more intense communication activity than their offline counterparts. Moreover, online consumers can be said to have a greater willingness to participate and, in some cases, thanks to, among others, the possibility of anonymity, a greater ease and boldness to express their opinions. Beside activity, online consumers can be characterized by a greater level of interactivity as they are enabled to engage in conversations through various channels and communities. Furthermore, the online sphere enables the consumer to fulfill many roles. As such, they can be a user, consumer, content generator, meaning maker or brand advocate at the same time (Archer–Brown et al. 2013; Kozinets, 1999, Fehér, 2011).

In an interactive relationship, organizations find themselves in direct connection with active consumers who contribute to co-creating contents and value, thereby strengthening the

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[1] In the following we refer to electronic word-of-mouth as e-WOM.

relationship between the company and the consumer. The result of the co-operation is an increased likelihood of consumer loyalty to the organization (Godes – Mayzlin, 2004).

Another crucial aspect of the digital sphere for marketing (communications) is the relative loss of direct control of the organization in the new communication space over the flow of messages concerning them as consumers not only converse but also create, modify and share organization-related contents (Kozinets, 1999). While not in direct control, organizations are still able to quickly distribute information and knowledge therefore maintaining an opportunity to influence (Csordás et al., 2013). As such, organizations are required to revise their goals, with the appropriate use of information prevailing over its control, in the ultimate aim to building strong and long-term relations with consumers (Kozinets, 1999).

Virtual communities and consumer communications within are therefore a growingly important area of corporate marketing communications, provided that e-WOM affects not only consumers, but also organizations through them. If the organization accepts that the online consumer who expresses their opinion in the virtual space is a "proactive actor of society, than a kind of future demand can be explored through the study of the [given online] space" (Dörnyei – Mitev, 2010: 62)., i.e. the virtual community and the there appearing e-WOM.

In order for e-WOM to become a corporate tool, it is necessary to explore the underlying dimensions of its process. In the process, it is necessary to distinguish between the characteristics of positive and negative e-WOM, as the two directions produce different effects and therefore different factors will be prevailing in their respective effect mechanisms. We argue that a dimension hitherto neglected in the literature, namely the aspects of content is determining, and this dimension provides a framework for the empirical research of the present dissertation.

E-WOM has a considerably expanded role in services, as it can contribute to reduce consumers' perceived risk related to uncertainty, itself arising from the essential nature of services (Mangold et al., 1999). This decision-support function is particularly important in the case of high-value services, such as hospitality. Indeed, in the case of hotel reservations, online reviews have become the most important source of information for consumers (Xie et al., 2014). Our research therefore focuses on e-WOM related to services.

The main aim of the research is to examine **how online communications between consumers (e-WOM) can be used for marketing communication purposes**. To this end, our study focuses on the information value of consumer reviews for organizations by exploring the characteristics of the content aspects of e-WOM. The dissertation's scientific goal is to contribute to the marketing literature on e-WOM.

II. Research methods

II.1. Methodology used: Qualitative methods

The research was conducted using qualitative methods. The reason for using qualitative methodology is the pronouncedly exploratory nature of the research, as it investigates the effects of actual consumer behavior in a turbulent environment, beyond testing consumer perceptions thereabout. The specifics of e-WOM equally support using a qualitative methodology that focuses on the study of community characteristics, as it "best helps the study of [social] cognitive representations" (Szvetelszky, 2010: 109). Hence an in-depth investigation of consumers' thoughts, opinions, attitudes, and intentions becomes possible while and the researcher can integrate a given community in an unobtrusive way, i.e. without disrupting its normal functioning (Hair et al., 2008).

However, it is essential for a rigorous qualitative study design to integrate various methods (Griggs, 1987). Accepting this view, the present study incorporates the methods of netnography, content analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus group interviews, thereby conforming to the multi-method approach (Bell – Bryman, 2007; Kozinets, 2002; Brodie et al., 2011).

Traditionally a mixed methodology research includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches. At the same time Morse (2010:484) argues that a mixed methodology can be considered as the joint use of a core and a supplementary component, where the results of the core method provide a context for the interpretation of the results of the supplementary method. According to Morse (2010), a QUAL-qual mixed method design is characterized by a standard, complete qualitative core method and other (more incomplete) qualitative methods in the supplementary component aimed at answering side-questions that arise during the main research. The supplementary component may be incomplete as a standalone research project (e.g. by not reaching theoretical saturation), at the same time it may follow a different research strategy and can use data from sources different from those of the core component to complete

the insights from this latter. A qualitative mixed method design is supported by the fact that netnography, used here as a principal methodology, can be considered a typically QUAL-qual research methodology (Kozinets, 2002). Based on the above, the present research can be described as a QUAL (content analysis) → qual (in-depth and focus group interviews) → QUAL (content analysis) project, with the core component being a content analysis within a netnography, while the supplementary components consist of in-depth interviews and focus groups.

The core method used in the study is a netnography (or webethnography, or online/virtual ethnography [Prior – Miller, 2012]). Netnography is a qualitative research method that can be used to examine the culture of online communities with the help of ethnographic research techniques (Kozinets, 2006). Langer and Beckman (2005) argue that content analysis is the primary method to be employed when conducting a netnography, while, in Kozinets's (2006: 132) view, "netnography should never be tied too closely with any one particular method of data collection and analysis" as it "encompasses multiple methods, approaches and analytic techniques".

In the present study, an observational netnography was supplemented with qualitative content analysis, which is "particularly well suited to the study of communications and to answering the classic question of communications research" (Babbie, 2010: 333). Cole (1988) considers content analysis in a more extended context, stating that beyond written text, verbal and visual communications can equally be analyzed by its means. Based on the above, content analysis was deemed particularly well-suited for the investigation of e-WOM as content, as it can be applied to the texts of consumer reviews as well as to photographs associated to them.

According to Kozinets (2002) in-depth interviews are an adequate data source in the study of online communities. These were used in our study as a supplemental method. Systematizing expert interviews were conducted to assess experts' opinions and experience related to e-WOM. Our supplemental study equally included a focus group study.

The scientific community can be said to have a certain aversion to focus groups following the widespread view that they are an easy and quick solution to a deeper investigation of a problem (Liamputtong, 2011 in Cyr, 2015). The unknown social context of participants having different characteristics can be considered another disadvantage of focus group studies, as this may downgrade the potential relationship between the participants, as well as the wider social

context and structures, all of which typically affect the evolution of consumer opinions and points of view (Hollander, 2004).

Focus groups however were deemed an appropriate supplemental method for the study as they contributed to understanding the types of interaction and experience related to the content of e-WOM (Sweeney et al., 2008), for the focal site of the main study offers several activities to its users (rating services, writing and sharing opinions) thus contributing to shaping consumer experiences and opinions but also to creating touchpoints for consumer interactions (Munzel – Kunz, 2014).

II.2. Research questions

- RQ1: How can e-WOM appearing in a virtual community (TripAdvisor) can be characterized as a content type?
- RQ2: How can positive and negative e-WOM as distinctive content types appearing in a virtual community (TripAdvisor) can be characterized?
- RQ3: What are the expectations about e-WOM of the various stakeholders in terms of content?
  - What are companies' fundamental expectations from e-WOM as a content type?
  - What are the most important decision-support contents for consumers?
- RQ4: In what ways do authentic and (supposedly) manipulated positive or negative e-WOM differ?
- RQ5: How do online rating sites become virtual communities?

II.3. Data collection and sample properties

The study is composed of three successive research phases as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research structure of the dissertation
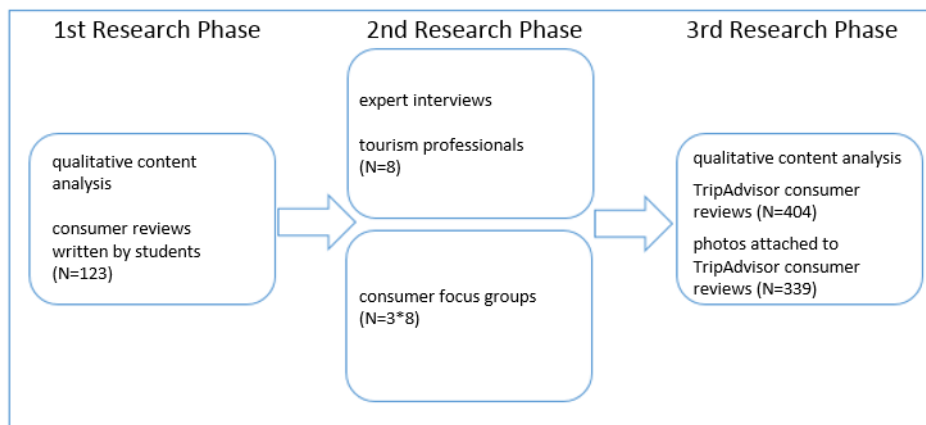
Source: Own elaboration

In the first research phase university students were asked to write (in the style of a review destined to be published on TripAdvisor) about their latest satisfying or dissatisfying experience related to accommodations during their travels. Participating students received bonus points for their efforts. After data cleansing 123 reviews were included in the sample, out of which 67 were positive and 56 negative[2]. This ratio can lead to somewhat distorted results at some level, as the actual ratio between positive and negative consumer reviews is 8:1 (Greenleigh, 2011). The aim of this first research phase was to test the research questions and to support the development of the codes to be used during the content analysis in the third (core) research phase.

In the second research phase expert interviews and focus groups were conducted. Seven **semi-structured systematizing expert interviews** were conducted. Expert subjects were selected with the filter condition that they be acquainted with the TripAdvisor website and that they have experience in dealing with online consumer opinions about hotels. Our goal was to add a different system of criteria in the study of the evaluation of e-WOM as content about hospitality services. The in-depth interviews were used to examine the topicality of the subject, to confirm the choice of the example of the TripAdvisor travel review website, and to examine, refine and supplement the code structure revealed during the first research phase. Table 1 gives an overview of the subjects interviewed in the second phase of our research.

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[2] During the presentation of the results of the first research phase, responses presenting a satisfying experience are considered positive e-WOM while responses dealing with a dissatisfying experience are considered negative e-WOM.

Table 1. Subjects of the expert interviews

Designation of the interviewee in the analysis	Date of the interview	Profession of interviewee	Characterization of the interviewee
A	May 2015	tourism professional; teacher-researcher	researching tourism trends
B	August 2015	hotel director – 4-star hotel in Budapest, Hungary	among the first in the hotel chain to pay special attention to consumer opinions on TripAdvisor; he responds to the opinions concerning the hotel himself
C	October 2015	hotel director – 4-star hotel in a county seat, Hungary	director of a hotel in a regional center – topicality of the subject in case of a smaller hotel
D	October 2015	marketing manager, regional middle manager	study of online consumer opinions in a marketing point of view
E	November 2015	director of communications – 5-star hotel in Budapest, Hungary	pay special attention to both positive and negative online consumer reviews; reviews included in marketing communications activities; integrated approach
F	November 2015	tourism professional; former middle manager in a hotel; teacher-researcher	complex approach: study and verification of both theoretical and practical significance of the topic
G	December 2015	tourism strategy consultant	development of online review sites; advice on the use of reviews on a strategic level

Source: Own elaboration

To supplement expert interviews, hybrid focus group interviews were conducted with consumers. Subject were filtered to be acquainted with and users of the TripAdvisor website in their choosing hotels. Three focus group sessions were conducted with a professional moderator in a designated focus group lab with a one-way mirror. All focus groups were composed of 8 participants in accordance with the 4-10 participant recommendation by Stake (2006). In designing the focus groups prior research results were taken into account (e.g Ridings et al., 2006), according to which most online consumers are **passive, contemplative members** (lurkers), and a smaller proportion (ideally between 10-20%) are **active contributors of opinions**. Based on this insight, one group was composed of active, contributing members of TripAdvisor opinions, while two other groups were only readers of opinions on the website. An overview of the focus groups is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Focus group interviews

Designation of the focus group in the analysis	Time of the focus group interview	Characterization of the interviewees	Number of participants (total; male:female)	average age (yrs)
H	November 2015	Are familiar with the TripAdvisor site, do read consumer opinions related to hospitality establishments published on the site when making a decision; Have contributed to the opinions on the site.	8 (4:4)	35
I	December 2015	Are familiar with the TripAdvisor site, do read consumer opinions related to hospitality establishments published on the site when making a decision;.	8 (4:4)	36
J	December 2015	Are familiar with the TripAdvisor site, do read consumer opinions related to hospitality establishments published on the site when making a decision;.	8 (4:4)	35

Source: Own elaboration

In the third research phase **consumer opinions and user-generated photographs related to consumer opinions on TripAdvisor** were collected following a **systematic sampling**. The population considered was all Budapest-based 4-star (on TripAdvisor) hotels with consumer opinions (and related photos) on TripAdvisor. A sampling took place on January 4-5, 2016[3]. Table 3 gives an overview of the employed filter criteria and the results of the sampling.

Table 3. Sample characteristics of the third research phase

	opinion (text)	photo related to the opinion
filter criteria	hotel with at least 30 opinions rank of the hotel in the site's listing English-language opinion related to a personal trip opinions appearing on first page and worst-rated opinions selected	first round: photos related to opinion already in the sample second round: filtering according to the order provided by the website related to an English-language opinion related to a personal trip
Terrible (1-point rating)	75	27
Poor (2-point rating)	113	14
Average (3-point rating)	31	57
Very good (4-point rating)	88	101
Excellent (5-point rating)	97	140
Total	404	339

Source: Own elaboration

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[3] TripAdvisor continually ranks hotels according to incoming consumer opinions. Rankings can therefore change on even a daily basis. Rankings and statistics presented here are valid as of Jan 4-5, 2016.

III. Results

III.1. Content and value analysis of e-WOM on TripAdvisor

Consumer opinions in the sample were shown to have more than one target groups: not only other consumers but also the hospitality establishment itself can be an intended recipient of the posted opinion, even as a primary target audience.

In the study of the contents of consumer opinions various dimensions were revealed that contribute to the quality aspects of e-WOM, providing valuable information not only to prospective consumers but equally to organizations.

One such dimension is the specificity of the wording of a consumer opinion. Categories identified under this dimension include **internal contradictions** and **problems of interpretability** as well as the idiosyncratic elements of wording. Internal contradictions and problems of interpretability both act as value destroyers: the presence of such elements can be a sign of an untrustworthy source, and therefore can act as a primary filter in the evaluation of the quality of an opinion. Narratives and figurative speech were idiosyncratic elements of style thanks to which written thoughts gain an ease and depth of interpretability. Moreover, such elements of style were shown to be often indirect information sources about the author of a consumer review, thereby offering a supplementary tool for service providers to more accurately characterize their target group. In addition, the wording of an opinion can act as an express and accurate sign of the level of satisfaction of its author, while the narratives pertaining to a given establishment can act as a form of quality assessment tool.

Idiosyncratic contents providing unique and specific information form another dimension of valuable information sources. Pieces of specific information or advice, featured service elements, external factors (i.e. contextual information), review-as-information-source and experience-response strategy are part of this category. Thanks to these sources of information present in a special context, hospitality establishments can become able to identify sources of competitive advantage or dangers related to their activity, to perceive new consumer needs, and to gather supplementary ideas and insights for potential service development and positioning strategy. Moreover, this information, as a source of market intelligence can be used as a basis for developing establishments' marketing communications activities. Thus, for example, they can acquire new insights and personal viewpoints based on user-generated photographs, or can

include in their communications new contextual elements (i.e. external factors) or communication channels deemed important by visitors.

Background information related to the author of a review is another identified dimension. Information within this dimension is generated and voluntarily shared by users while at the same time being specific to them, therefore bearing exceptional marketing value. While background information provided by reviewers was observed to work on several levels of depth, it still contributed to a better understanding of the target group by providing information on such points as a visitor's prior expectations, thanks to which service gaps such as the quality gap between expected and perceived service can be handled. This information equally provides insight into the development of new service elements, or in the evaluation of a hospitality establishment's positioning strategy.

Among dimensions affecting objectivity the following elements were identified: **affective components, specific information, multifaceted review and subjective inference**. The sole presence of these elements gives a primary sign to hospitality establishments on the potential general marketing value of a consumer review. Among these dimensions, however, affective components play an even more important role. Thanks to these, grades of consumer satisfaction can be assumed, thus providing a textual qualitative tool similar to the evaluation of non-verbal components in an interpersonal communication situation.

In the case of photographs attached to reviews, however, only a moderate information value could be identified. While these pictures might contribute to providing insight to the establishment e.g. in the personalization of their own visual self-presentation during their marketing communications activities, the images in the sample were revealed to provide limited further use as "exclusive" information. In this field, therefore, hospitality establishments have a role in educating their consumers.

In summary, one can state that the examined consumer reviews originating from TripAdvisor are a rich source of information and can indeed provide valuable feedback and a communication source to hospitality establishments.
By characterizing the content of user reviews we provide a novel dimension of analysis for these companies, through which they can decide which content element of consumer reviews

is most decisive to them. Based on this consideration, they can then consider consumer reviews on a strategic level.

Figure 2. Identified content dimensions and their value for marketing communications
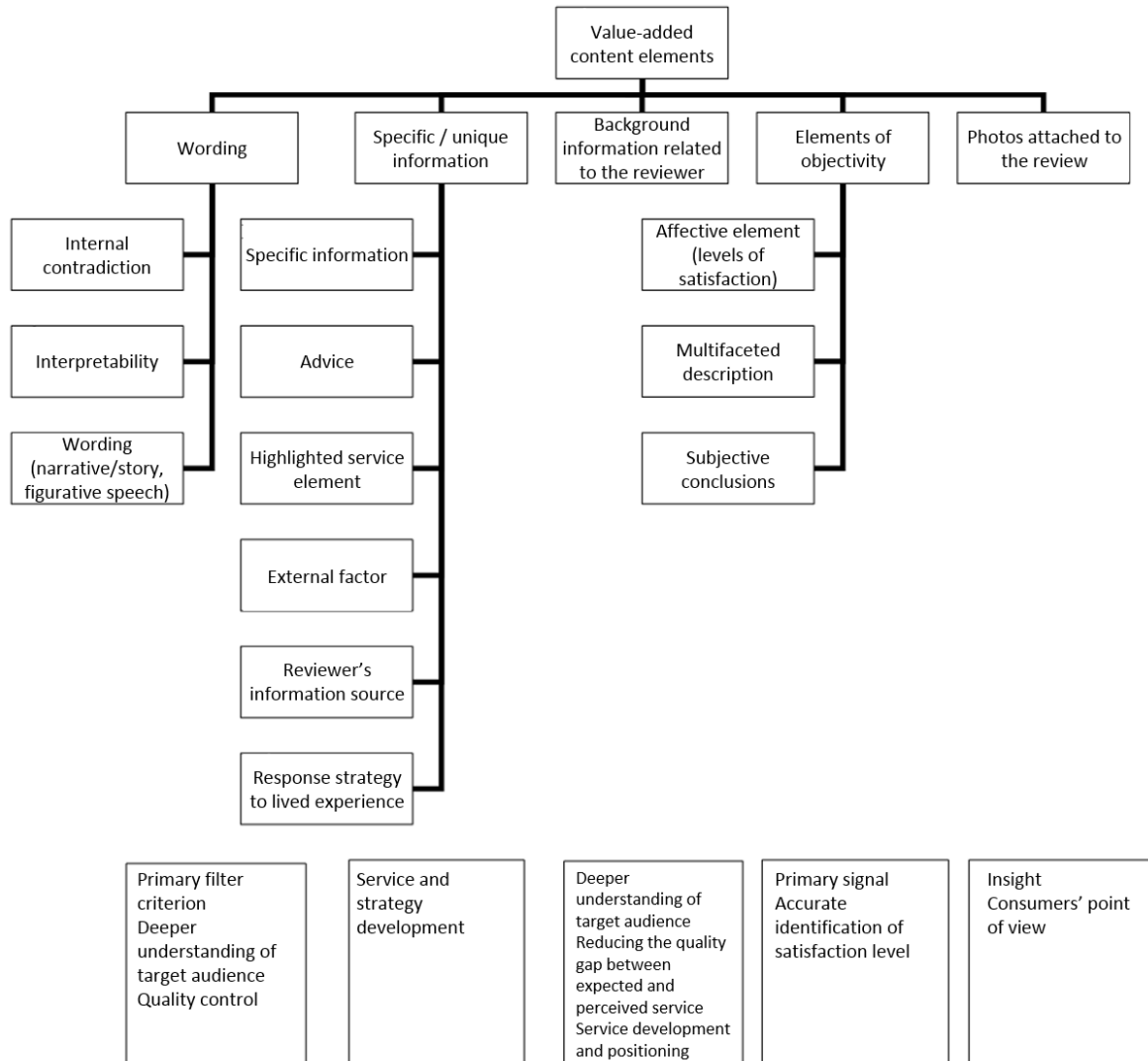
Source: Own elaboration

III.2. Content aspects of positive and negative e-WOM

Positive reviews from TripAdvisor in the sample generally had a double target audience, namely peers (i.e. potential visitors to a place, with similar interests) and the hotel itself (and its management). In terms of wording, positive reviews in the sample resorted to an important amount of figurative speech, as well as to actual consumer narratives/stories related to the reviewer's own experience with the hotel. At the same time, most positive reviews were exempt

of internal contradictions or problems of interpretability. Thus, positive reviews in the sample can be characterized by clearly-formulated information and wording that allowed for generating information that can be deemed valuable.

Specific and/or unique information equally appeared in these positive opinions, generally in connection with the material environment or a particular element of the service experience. Another recurring content was advice given by the reviewer to the hotel, generally pertaining to the servicing of material elements, accessories in the hotel but also to ideas for the further development of the hotel, in connection with its material environment and human resources. Information in reviews pertaining to the external environment primarily focused on external services (showing the complex nature of the experience of a hotel stay), but generally with fewer actual specifics. Another appearing dimension was the expression of personal loyalty, where in most cases a form of delight was present. Based on the study's results, positive reviews in the sample were generally hardly general or one-sided, thus contradicting one of the study's premises.

The presence of background information related to the reviewer was all but typical among positive reviews in the sample, letting even intimate types of details appear in the texts, thus supporting the highly personal nature of online consumer reviews.

In connection with the general objectivity of positive reviews, the study observed a low general level of subjectivity of these reviews, while multifaceted reviews were present on multiple occasions, pertaining to a particular service element or even to the service in its entirety, with often a number of specifics included. Interestingly, expressions with an affective element in these reviews equally tended towards objectivity, as positive reviews in the sample were characterized by a moderate satisfaction. Elements of dissatisfaction equally appeared as an unexpected dimension of positive reviews, often as part of a more complex advice destined to hotels or as part of a multifaceted description of a reviewer's experience. Most positive reviews in the sample can be characterized by a moderate level of emotionality, while the appearing expressions of delight are sometimes – in an unexpected way – accompanied by the expression of outrage. While outrage itself is altogether hardly typical to the pool of positive reviews in the sample, it often appeared as focusing on one specific service element. This result highlights that – altogether – positive reviews tended to provide objective points of view.

Positive reviews were more likely to have attached image files as compared to negative reviews. Attached photos can be characterized by a variety of themes and a moderate quality of execution. Attached photos in the sample generally were primarily destined to support and adorn the reviews' words.

Content characteristics of negative opinions in the sample largely overlapped with those of positive reviews. Therefore, in the following description of negative reviews, the presentation focuses on the differences. Regarding the target audience of a review, reviewers' own self appeared most often alongside hotels. This difference of target audience between positive and negative reviews highlights the importance of these latter to organizations in question.

Specific and/or unique information equally appeared among negative opinions, generally in connection with and with an emphasis on a particular element of the service experience, making it a decisive point of the review. Furthermore, staff if often treated separately from the rest of the service experience, even though few specifics appear here from the reviews. Advice given to hotels in question equally appeared among negative reviews, even though in these cases hotels were characteristically addressed in the advice with an expressed outrage. Exit strategy appeared as a particular element of the subsample of negative reviews, with reviewers verbally expressing their exit from the future use of a hotel's services, an expression often accompanied again with that of outrage. Interestingly, and contradicting prior expectations, a sign of conditional loyalty equally appeared in negative reviews, and this dimension also was identified as a factor increasing a review's objectivity. Negative reviews in the sample typically had a low level of bias, and did contain specific types of information.

Background information related to the reviewer's person was equally typical of negative reviews, but information pertaining to personal space was relegated to the background.

In terms of the overall objectivity of the negative reviews, while subjective opinions can indeed be found in the subsample (most of them pertaining to the misclassification of the hotel), their number was fairly limited. Multifaceted descriptions were typically present in the subsample, similarly to positive reviews, even though specific information provided by reviewers was scarcer. Expressions with an affective element in these reviews equally tended towards objectivity, as reviews in this subsample were characterized by a moderate dissatisfaction. Satisfaction appeared as an unexpected dimension of objectivity of negative reviews, typically pertaining to a given service element While most reviews in the subsample can be characterized as moderately emotional, next to the appearing expressions of outrage – in an expected way – expressions of delight equally appeared in a few reviews. This result highlights that negative reviews – just like their positive counterparts – altogether tended to provide objective points of view.

Pictures attached to negative reviews of the sample were found to be lower in quality, still, they were used in the aim to support the written negative opinion.

As a result of the content analysis, one can state that both positive and negative e-WOM in the sample turned out to be valuable sources of information to hotels in question, which finding contradicts the view expressed by experts in the in-depths interview phase of the study. As such, positive reviews not only avail in number but also in content as valuable sources of information. As such, hospitality establishments ought to consider them when evaluating their services through e-WOM.

Negative reviews were found to be primarily considered by interviewed experts as potential threats. Our study reveals that – contrarily to this prior assumption – user-generated reviews in the sample tried to be objective in their own way, while angry and unrealistically negative opinions often perceived by professionals as dominant among negative reviews were, in reality, relegated to the background.

It also became apparent that the quality of consumer reviews can be ameliorated, for which hotels can be instrumental in educating their guests. By this, they can contribute to considerably lowering the presence of quality-reducing elements within consumer opinions following a hotel experience.

Table 4. Content elements of positive and negative consumer reviews

Content element	Determining feature of the content element	
	in positive opinions	in negative opinions
highlighted service element	typically one highlighted service element (with a marginal role within the review) material environment typically highlighted (with specifics included)	typically one highlighted service element (with a central role within the review) staff typically highlighted (moderate level of emotionality; low level of specifics)
advice (to peers)	most common areas: personnel, service quality, external environment; specifics and general formulation equally present,; low level of delight	typical focus on service quality; more likely general in wording; negligible amount of expressed outrage
advice (to hotel)	most advice on servicing of material elements; other recurring areas: material environment, staff presence of delight	most advice on servicing of material elements; other recurring areas: material environment, staff outrage more likely than among positive reviews
external environment	recommendation and brief description of external services; moderate level of satisfaction used in descriptions; low level of included specifics	altogether: low level of presence of such mentions more frequently: comparison of focal hotel's services with external services (with higher level of specifics)
response strategy to lived experience	supported by arguments, and personal loyalty are most common – large-scale delight	effective, verbal (most common); conditional exit – sober wording (save the expressions of verbal exit, where the presence of outrage is characteristic); expression of negative opinion – typically subjective; presence of actual or conditional loyalty
characteristic elements of wording	figurative speech slightly more typical in positive than negative reviews; high interpretability and low level of internal contradiction; narrating an actual experience related to the hotel is most common	high interpretability and low level of internal contradiction, narrating an actual experience related to the hotel is most common
multifaceted description	pertaining to a specific service element or to the service as a whole acceptable amount of specifics	pertaining to a specific service element or to the service as a whole low amount of specifics
subjective conclusions	low frequency; well-thought assumptions	low frequency; typically pertaining to hotel's classification
affective expressions	majority can be described as satisfied; satisfaction appearing in the form of an indirect advice or a multifaceted description – factor increasing review's objectivity; narratives more typical to partial or complete satisfaction; focus of expressed delight: a specific service element or to the service as a whole – narrative and loyalty as conclusion; outrage pertaining to one service element – in the background within the opinion as a whole, use of reserved language;	majority can be described as dissatisfied; narratives more typical to dissatisfaction; presence of satisfaction for a given service element; delight pertaining to one service element – factor increasing review's objectivity; focus of expressed outrage: a specific service element or to the service as a whole – narrative and figurative speech as typical modes of expression;
background information related to the reviewer	typical contents: information pertaining to public, social and intimate spaces; most typical appearance of personal space	typical contents: information pertaining to public, social and intimate spaces;
photo attached to the review	greater number of attached photos, varied in theme; photos primarily destined to support and adorn reviews' words; full shots, medium shots more typical; typically moderate level of quality	typically presenting intimate space, inside of room and bathroom; photos primarily destined to support reviews' words; typically close-ups or details; typically moderate level of quality

Source: Own elaboration

III.3. Stakeholders' expectations about e-WOM

An additional research question arose in connection with the identified content elements, namely which are those that stakeholders (consumers and hotels) deem valuable.

The in-depth interviews highlighted the importance of a review's title, and the presence of information and specifics about cleanliness, hotel staff and exterior environment, marking these as required elements of a valuable review. Focus group interviewees, however, found a review's title much more irrelevant, while they introduced information about food as another expected content element.

Based on these differences between expressed expectations, one can deduce that consumers attach importance to certain service elements (such as catering) that may be disregarded by hospitality establishments as decision support factors. Such identified service elements in the research were typically hardly investment-intensive, while, based on consumer reviews, they provided an important subjective added relative value to consumers. This finding highlights the fact that a deeper understanding of consumer reviews might contribute to unveiling consumer-specific decision support elements, otherwise potentially overlooked by organizations. Identifying such factors can contribute – in the long term – to the possible repositioning of a hospitality establishment.

Beyond expected content elements, our study equally focused on unveiling information that our interviewees (i.e. decision makers) deemed valuable. These dimensions were altogether defined as factor increasing reviews' overall quality. Such dimensions identified during the in-depth expert interviews were: specific/unique information, multifaceted analyses, the presence of background information on the reviewer, characteristic elements of wording, and photos attached to reviews. As seen in the analysis of the contents of positive and negative e-WOM, the presence of all the latter dimensions was identified in the research sample, supporting the overall marketing value and quality of consumer-generated reviews.

III.4. (Supposedly) manipulated e-WOM

As show in the theoretical review, manipulated e-WOM can be considered a specific type of e-WOM, where – as part of a targeted marketing communications activity – an organization "employs" a consumer or other organizational stakeholder to generate e-WOM related to its activity. One of our study's presumptions was to identify content dimensions that could complete the related literature.

The focus groups enabled us to identify personal strategies through which participants filter e-WOM that they deem manipulated. Dimensions of these strategies were the presence of unrealistic situations in the reviews, an excessive wordiness of the review, its too general nature, the lack of any personal background information, or the use of unequivocally extreme wording in a review.

These results highlight that these dimensions act as the opposite of factors increasing reviews' overall quality. This finding however raises the question whether participants blend together the phenomena of low-quality and manipulated reviews. The present study's framework did not allow to further examine the perceived difference between genuinely manipulated and supposedly manipulated consumer opinions.

At the same time our in-depth interviews revealed that content manipulation is an actual and topical phenomenon, as various levels of manipulation were identified from the interviewees' mentions. We therefore call for further scientific investigation in the area, as if these manipulated reviews can correctly be identified then platform owners and/or hospitality establishments can take effective action against them. Hotels can furthermore educate their consumers to be able to confidently identify manipulated opinions, thus supporting them in their decision-making process, and protecting themselves against misleading negative reviews that can be at the origin of great actual damage to the hotels.

Table 5. Manipulated opinions according to the literature and the results of the focus group study

	Manipulated e-WOM in the literature (based on Banerjee – Chua, 2014; Bambauer-Sachse – Mangold, 2013; Hu et al. , 2012)	(Supposedly) manipulated e-WOM (based on the focus group study)
based on	fictional situations	unrealistic /nonsensical situation [3 mentions]
length	medium-length or wordy	extreme (short or extremely short; excessively wordy) [4 mentions]
legibility, interpretability	more readable	-
level of information	noninformative (ambiguous; relating a situation that never happened)	general description; lack of specifics; one-sided description lack of personal nature
writing style	possibility of same style among various sources	overmannered style; offbeat vocabulary; exaggerations and strong emphases in the text; superlatives
grammar	more frequent recourse to past and future tenses use of multiple exclamation points	-
type of evaluation	contains both a score and a textual evaluation	-
balance of opinion	extreme parts more likely (but presence also of normal level)	unequivocally extreme
affective components	emphasized recourse to emotions	use of extreme emotions

Source: Own elaboration

III.5. Social aspects of consumer reviews

The description of TripAdvisor as a social medium showed that it can be characterized as a virtual community based on common interest but weak social ties. The present study's results confirm this characterization. Our study points out the social dynamics of e-WOM on this channel, as reviews in the sample did refer back, on multiple occasions, to other TripAdvisor reviews. These references suggest a fundamental trust and bonding towards other reviewers and supports the phenomenon of appreciation of social media as a source of information. In our sample of reviews we did not observe signs of peculiar language use or the presence of a shared communication standard, which would be signs of a deeper level of community.

However, the idea of community is reinforced by the presence of clearly identifiable roles which determined the utility of a review. Such identified roles were those of raging, unrealistic, impartial, blackmailing, focusing, projecting or pretense-members, or that of trolls. The highest level of utility was identified at impartial reviews that developed their description in both horizontal and vertical perspectives, thereby offering a thorough and therefore valuable information to readers. Focused reviews provided a lower-profile, yet still prominent utility. Their descriptions provided an in-depth information of a limited number of highlighted service elements. Altogether, impartial reviews were most numerous in the positive subsample, while

focusing reviews dominated the negative subsample. This result once again highlights the overall business utility that can be extracted from within these user-generated reviews.

Based on the study's results, it can be stated that TripAdvisor users do form a genuine community. Therefore this channel provides a wider range of opportunity for hospitality establishments, as they can become members of the aforementioned community, thereby contributing to raising consumer trust, while they can equally use the platform as a direct communication channel with consumers. It also becomes apparent that consumer education is still a necessity, for which this channel can provide a suitable framework.

To conclude, one can state that the analysis of consumer reviews of selected hotels on TripAdvisor showed that these reviews can provide hotels with valuable information, that can be used for developing both their services and marketing communications.

Figure 3. Identified consumer roles and their main characteristics
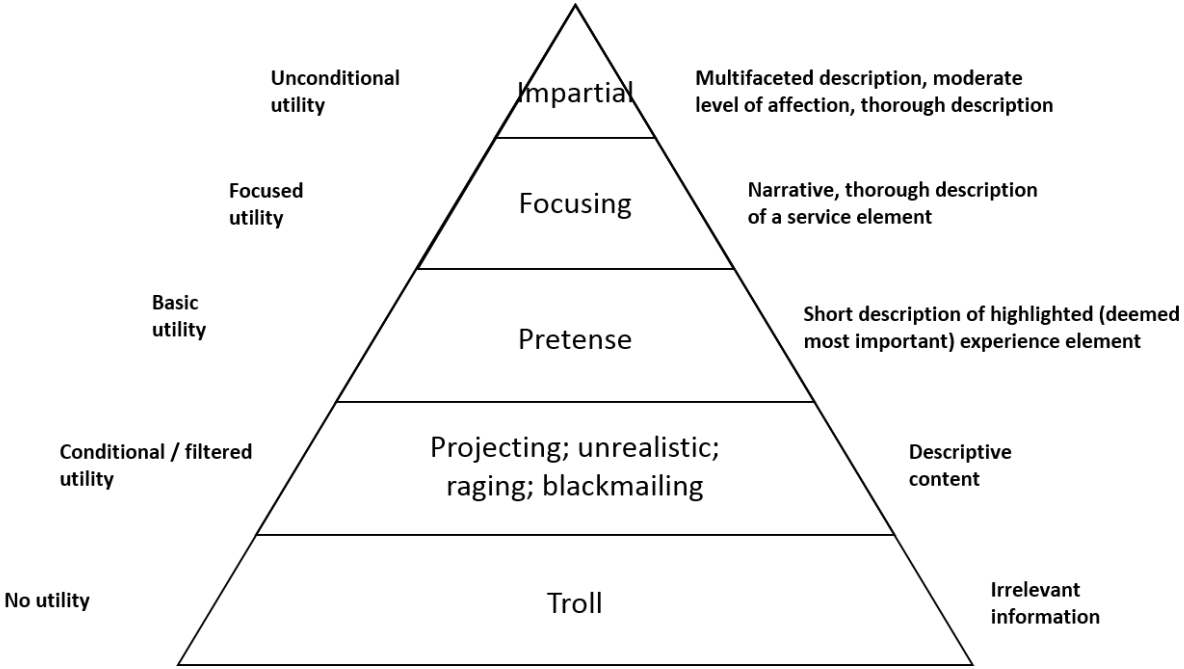
Source: Own elaboration

III.6. Significance of the results

One scientific significance of the present research is its exclusive reliance on a QUAL-qual research design to answer its research questions, thus providing further evidence for the importance of such studies in marketing research. Our study confirms that – as opposed to previous scholarly research on e-WOM largely emphasizing quantitative methodologies – that the use of a purely qualitative research can be justified.

Another scientific achievement of the present study is to highlight the importance of studying the contents of e-WOM. Indeed, even though there is an ever growing research corpus on e-WOM, studies focusing on content are mostly relegated to the background.

Our study points out that e-WOM is now hardly only diffused through textual contents, with visual and audiovisual forms exponentially gaining in importance. Following this observation, we propose an extension to the definition of electronic word-of-mouth.

Another scientific aim was to complete the Hungarian-language literature on the topic. Even though a number of national studies already focus on the phenomenon (see e.g. Michalkó et al., 2015; Kemény, 2015; Nagy et al., 2014), research activity in the field is considerably lagging behind its international dynamics.

The present research shows that it is worthwhile for hospitality establishments to devote a greater attention to positive opinions beyond primarily dealing with negative reviews. Our study calls for the necessity of a change of culture in terms of the handling of consumer reviews and to related response policies.

Identified content elements ought to be used by hospitality establishments as assessment criteria, thanks to which a deeper understanding of target audiences and actual consumers is made possible on these channels, thereby contributing to reducing the perception gap in service quality. Identified consumer needs can in turn lead to service development, and market intelligence filtered from consumer-generated reviews can contribute to revise and improve their marketing communications strategy. Furthermore, e-WOM provides an additional source of marketing communications channels, such as user-generated photos, and in an integrated approach, the fine-tuning of the organization's own imagery to fit consumer feedback.

Our results draw hotels' attention to the fact that consumer education can considerably improve the quality of consumer reviews, and as a crucial element of consumer decision-making, to

eventually and actually take the role of a "sales assistant" specified in the dissertation's theoretical part.

One recommended area of consumer education is to dispel myths among consumers about services to be expected from various types of hotels, thus moderating potentially unrealistic prior consumer expectations, reducing in turn the potential perceived quality gap between expected and perceived service.

Another recommended area of consumer education relates to the reliability of online opinions. The dimensions identified in the study can help hotels to determine the pool of content elements deemed most important in their communications. Chosen elements can be integrated in hotels' own evaluation systems, thanks to which they can facilitate the creation of online consumer reviews about complex touristic experiences, and at the same time ensure the quality of these opinions.

TripAdvisor can be used as a channel for such consumer education initiatives, as hotels can educate potential consumers in their responses to actual reviews. We therefore believe that hotels should devote a greater attention to consumer review sites such as TripAdvisor.

III.7. Limitations and future studies

The present study suffers from the customary flaws of qualitative research, thus in spite of the methodological triangulation carried out through the various research phases its results cannot be generalized. Moreover, subjective interpretations may have appeared during the coding process. However, results presented beforehand may serve as a sound base for further quantitative research in the area.

Our research was limited to examining consumer reviews on 4-star hotels in Budapest. This operationalization of the empirical work is associated with a more specialized circle of reviewers, as the authors of reviews in the sample can be assumed to be primarily middle-class foreigners. These socio-demographic characteristics may have distorted the results, as reviewers with a similar background can be expected to be more experienced and better educated than the average. It is therefore recommended that the investigation be extended as to include a wider range of hospitality establishments, and notably lower category hotels, and hotels situated outside of the capital. Such an extended research framework would enable a certain comparability and filtering of the distorting effect of commenters' backgrounds.

In addition, the communication channel containing the opinions can equally be decisive: our research only includes only one interface with a proprietary evaluation system, namely TripAdvisor. We recommend that further research take into account several other information sources with a variety of evaluation systems, thus letting to reveal a potential impact of the platform on user-generated content.

Another proposed future research direction is the more in-depth study of manipulated opinions, for which the present study failed to provide a proper framework.

Finally, research on e-WOM in visual and audiovisual forms is a novel and promising field of research. To complete the findings of our study in this area, we recommend an interdisciplinary approach, with, among others, the integration of semantics and semiotics.

IV. List of publications by the author in the dissertation's topic

Refereed journal articles (in English)

- Markos-Kujbus, Éva, Kiss, Tünde, Gáti, Mirkó, Csordás, Tamás (2015): Social media activities of small and medium-sized enterprises: Special contents and their consumer reactions in the case of Hungarian catering establishments. KÖZGAZDÁSZ FÓRUM 18:(125) pp. 78-97.
- Markos-Kujbus, Éva, Csordás, Tamás, Gáti, Mirkó (2015): Small businesses and their social media audiences: What inspires consumers to like pages of small catering establishments in social media? KÖZGAZDÁSZ FÓRUM 18:(123) pp. 77-98.

Refereed journal articles (in Hungarian)

- Markos-Kujbus, Éva, Csordás, Tamás (2016): Fogyasztók a vállalatok ellen? – Negatív online szájreklám a virtuális kereskedelmi közösségekben [Consumers against organizations? - Negative electronic word-of-mouth in virtual commerce communities]. MÉDIAKUTATÓ 16:(3-4) pp. 157-168.
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- Csordás, Tamás, Markos-Kujbus, Éva, Gáti, Mirkó (2014): The Attributes of Social Media as a Strategic Marketing Communication Tool. *JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION* 4:(1) pp. 48-71.

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- Kujbus, Éva (2010): Zsebben hordozható világ – avagy a mobil Internet fejlődése és térhódítása [Pocket portable world – the evolution and expansion of mobile internet]. *E-TUDOMÁNY* 8:(1) pp. 1-24.
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- Markos-Kujbus, Éva, Kiss, Tünde, Gáti, Mirkó, Csordás, Tamás (2015): Social media activities of small and medium - sized enterprises – special contents and their consumer reactions in the case of Hungarian catering establishments. *ICEBM 2015*, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, Nov 20-21, 2015.

- Markos-Kujbus Éva, Csordás Tamás, Gáti Mirkó (2015): Small businesses and their social media audiences: what inspires consumers to like pages of small catering establishments in social media? *ICEBM 2015*, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, Nov 20-21, 2015.

- Markos-Kujbus, Éva, Csordás, Tamás (2015): Users' Perception of Online Consumer Reviews in Virtual Commerce Communities, *6th EMAC Regional Conference*, Vienna University of Economics and Business, Vienna, Austria, Sep 16-18, 2015, ISBN:978-3-200-04265-0

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Conference presentation and/or appearance in book of proceedings (in Hungarian):
- Gáti, Mirkó, Markos-Kujbus, Éva, Csordás, Tamás (2015): „Lájk első látásra": Mi inspirálja a márkák kedvelését az online térben, kis vendéglátóhelyek esetében? ["Like at first sight?" – What inspires liking brands in online social media in the case of small catering establishments?] Paper preseted at *Az Egyesület a Marketing Oktatásért és Kutatásért XXI. Országos Konferenciája* [21st National Conference of the Hungarian Association for the Education and Research of Marketing], Aug. 27-28, 2015, Budapest, Hungary. ISBN:978-963-313-189-3, pp. 57-67.

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- Markos-Kujbus Éva (2015): A harmadik generációs Kia Sportage megjelenése a hazai piacon In Malota Erzsébet (ed.). Marketing nemzetközi színtéren: Esettanulmányok a hazai és külföldi piacokról. 224 p. Budapest: Alinea Kiadó, pp. (ISBN: 9786155303883)

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