Exploring customer journeys in the hospitality industry: booking through digital platforms

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, the hospitality industry experienced new changes in its business model. Firstly, the emergence of the informal or also called shared-economy models that offer an alternative solution to the customers. It also allowed the inclusion of new buyers with lower income.

Moreover, the exponential increase in online travel agencies usage allows customers to evaluate, compare and gather information to find the most suitable accommodation for their needs.

As it was highlighted in the World Economic Forum: “new entrants such as online travel agencies (OTA), meta-search engines and booking platforms are harnessing technological developments to build digital platforms that aggressively disrupt the value chain” (Accenture, 2017, p.7).

Also, new concepts such as influencer marketing, user-generated content, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) are shifting the power from the firms to the customers by giving them voice and resources to be well-informed before the purchase.

All the above situations were motivators to explore how does the customer’s journey to book an accommodation looks like nowadays? The main question is broken into five sub-questions:

RQ 1 What are the touchpoints during the customers’ booking journey?
RQ 2 What are the key drivers for booking?
RQ 3 What is the role of the brand's digital channels in the customer decision journey for booking accommodations?
RQ 4 What are the phases of the customer journey for booking an accommodation?
RQ 5 How do customers form expectations in regard to a future accommodation?

In order to answer the research questions, the present thesis will offer four major chapters.
The second chapter (literature review), will provide the hospitality industry’s context by presenting key concepts of digital marketing, services marketing, and a theoretical framework about customer journeys.

The third chapter will present the methodology, research design, and its relevance to the Marketing and Business field.

The fourth chapter will present the elaboration of the central topic. Firstly, introducing the individual cases with their own visual representation of the customer journey. Secondly, it will expose a cross-case chart that shows the parity points and differences across cases in terms of booking processes. Afterward, the chapter will offer a closer description of the booking stages and will reflect on the customer journey’s theories exposed in the literature review. Finally, the chapter will present how the customers built their expectations before experiencing the accommodation.

The fifth chapter will expose possible limitations that offer possibilities to continue with further researches.

The sixth chapter will provide conclusions based on the most relevant findings and will provide recommendations to the hospitality businesses.
2. Literature review

The literature review aims to provide an overview of the hospitality industry, the new technologies that reshape its business model, and the consumer behavior in terms of media consumption and purchasing decisions.

To understand the current state of the hospitality industry and its customers’ decision journey\(^1\), this chapter is divided in three parts: hospitality in the XXI century, customer’s journey models, and digital marketing activities for hospitality brands.

The industry overview will show the latest changes and players involved in the hospitality’s ecosystem. It is based on reports and white papers prepared by professional consultants such as Deloitte and Accenture. Moreover, it will explore academic articles related to the travel and hotel industry.

The second section, will focus on customers by presenting models of their decision-making processes to buy. It is based on findings from academic articles, consultants, and other research firms.

The last section of the literature review will expose today's online marketing activities. Key concepts are founded in academic and online articles that are up to date on digital marketing trends.

The gathered data also will serve to understand the communication between hospitality businesses and customers through digital channels.

2.1 Hospitality Industry in the XXI century.

Hospitality industry forms part of the travel and tourism ecosystem, focusing on the accommodation services for tourists. Some authors consider catering and recreational activities as part of this sector (Soultana, 2012); however emerging businesses are reshaping the concept of hospitality.

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\(^{1}\) Customer’s path or process to buy a product or service. Also called Customer’s Purchase Journey or Customer’s Decision Journey.
Deloitte (2017, p. 6) highlights: “non-traditional entrants (i.e., Airbnb), and start-ups are disrupting the marketplace and placing stress on the traditional ways that hotels do business”. Therefore, hospitality nowadays includes hotels, bed & breakfasts, and new models of informal accommodations (Guttentag, 2013)

The informal sector is often characterized by having low entry barriers (Aznar, Sayeras, 2016), lacking on regulations by public authorities (Becker, 2004 as cited in Guttentag, 2017) and by providing limited services. Informal businesses usually offer the overnight accommodation without catering service (Zervas, Proserpio and Byers 2017).

In contrast, traditional hospitality definitions refer to this industry as a sector which includes food and beverages, tourism, lodging, and recreation segments that allow the scalability of the business (Novak, 2017).

The traditional models of hospitality can be seen in the world’s biggest hotel groups, such as Marriott, Hilton or Intercontinental. Their goal is to offer the best possible experience, as the Chief Digital Officer of Marriott affirms: “in travel, digital transformation is not just about technology. To succeed, we must bring together pixels and our people to create a flawless travel experience” (Accenture, 2017, p.14).

Nevertheless, traditional and disruptive hospitality businesses have points of parity, being exposed below.

First, hospitality comes from the French “providing travelers with care and shelter” (Walker, 2013 cited in Diaconu, 2017), meaning that it’s core services is to provide an accommodation.

Second, as hospitality belongs to the services industry, guests satisfaction is highly related to their expectations and the real service provided (Šambronská, 2013). Therefore,
accommodation business takes into account the touchpoints\textsuperscript{2} with guests to offer a major experience.

Third, hospitality usually targets the touristic sector, it implies that different types of lodging business (either hotels or Airbnb) competes against each other for the hospitality share of market (Morgan Stanley, 2016).

Once mentioned the core characteristics of the hospitality industry, the following section will present an introduction to the digital platforms that have replaced the traditional travel agencies, having an impact on the journey to book accommodations.

2.1.1 Hospitality in the digital era

Another major change in the hospitality sector is the increased use of booking platforms where users can compare and purchase accommodations. Traditional travel agencies are not the only intermediaries anymore since websites and browsers offer a major view of the available options.

The emerging platforms have reshaped the classic process of booking accommodations, as it was mentioned in the World Economic Forum (Accenture, 2017, p.7): “new entrants such as online travel agencies (OTA), meta-search engines and booking platforms are harnessing technological developments to build digital platforms that aggressively disrupt the value chain”.

Online travel agencies or aggregators can be defined as an online platform that allows guests to check and buy the available accommodation or travel product (Hotel Technology Index, 2018). One of the OTA’s disadvantage is just showing the hotels that they have a contract with; the most popular OTAs are Expedia, Orbitz, and Travelocity (Hospitality Technologies, 2017).

Another option that consumers have when searching for an accommodation is the meta-search engines, such as Google, Kayak or Skyscanner. Those engines are challenging the\textsuperscript{2} “Any interaction that might alter the way that your customer feels about a product, brand, business or service”. (Interaction Design Foundation, 2018, p.4)
OTAs since they avoid biasing the results by offering a wider range of results (Hospitality Technologies, 2017).

The emergence of those digital platforms had encouraged the creation of hotel websites as part of their marketing strategy. Some authors suggest that having a site online had become a minimum requirement of the hotels (Chan and Law, 2006 cited in Csordás, 2014) to be in touch with the consumers and be potentially an option when they browse for an accommodation.

Marketers in the hospitality field nowadays take into consideration the websites and other online promotional channels, such as social media, to build the total customer experience (Atwal & Williams, 2009).

The concept of experience marketing is becoming relevant in the hospitality industry since the quality of interactions are important to define the consumer's perception and might add (or not) value to his experience. As a touchpoint with the customer, the online presence is part of the experience marketing strategies (Atwal & Williams, 2009).

2.1.2 Gap Model for Services Marketing

Tourism and hospitality have been studied as one of the most experience-based businesses in the services industry (Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Yuan & Wu, 2008 in Imran Khan et al 2015). Therefore it is advised to hospitality managers to pay extra attention to the quality of the experience delivered (Imran Khan et al 2015).

Customer experience in the services industry is defined as the customer touchpoints with the firm before, during and after the service delivery (Berry et al., 2002 cited on Imran Khan et al 2015). The perception of the quality is strongly related to the customer expectations and the real service provided (Šambronská, 2013).

Researchers in the Services Marketing field had proposed models to understand the variables in the consumer's perception of the service delivered. A model that can be applied in today's hospitality industry is the Services Quality Gaps Model.
As it is shown in figure below, the model proposes that there are five gaps between the customer's expectation and the service delivery (Bitner, 2010). For the purpose of the research, the present thesis will analyze the gap 1 and 4 since they are related to the communications a prior the consumer experience.

![Gap model of service quality](image)

**Figure 1.** Gap model of service quality


The first gap is the “actual expectations of customers and the way how the management understands their expectations” (Blešić et al. 2010, p. 42). **Word of mouth (WOM) plays an important role when the consumer is forming expectations** since the message is communicated from an independent person without relation with the company, so the consumer rely more on an objective source (Eszes, 2010 in Markos-Kujbus 2017).

Nowadays it is also called electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) since the **travel forums, blogs and other online platforms have enabled users to migrate to digital sites.** Customers no longer wait for the first trial to form expectations towards a service or brand. “Customers can now validate the claims of the companies related to the products/services beforehand” (Ind & Riondino, 2001 cited on Gupta, P., Laddha, S., & Singh, S., 2017).
The fourth gap refers to the distance between the communication by the company and the actual delivered service (Blešić et al. 2010). Differently from the first gap, the fourth refers to the messages communicated by company's own media\(^3\) that influences the customers experience (Sautter et al., 2004).

The goal of the hospitality managers is to close the gaps of the model (Bitner, 2010). That implies not only a quality management of the services delivered but also the accuracy of the firm’s communication and the management of the brand’s online presence.

Nowadays, the hospitality industry is using a **customer-centered approach to ensure the customer experience quality**. As Bitner (2010, p.199) mentions:

“The primary goal of the model is to meet or exceed customer expectations, and strategies used to achieve that objective (whether operations, human resource or technology-based) are ultimately anchored on the customer”.

Hospitality companies that seek success are focused on the consumer needs, especially now that they have higher expectations. Accenture (2017, p.9) refers to this strategy as consumer-centric approach, highlighting that “customers seek highly personalized and seamless experiences, all connected by the platform of their choice”.

### 2.2 Purchase journey of the digital customer

Companies that start their marketing strategy with a deeper understanding of the consumer are more competitive and have higher opportunities to increase market share and profit (Buzzell and Gale, 1987; Zeithaml, 2000 in Jay 2006).

The customer-centered approach in the hospitality businesses has important drivers that managers shall take into consideration before building the sales and marketing strategy. Those are listed below:

First, **OTAs and meta-search engines give users access to every information of the companies before purchasing**. Consumers can compare price, location and other

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\(^3\) Brand’s own channels. I.e. YouTube channel, website, Facebook page, Twitter account, etc.
characteristics relevant to their purchase decision, in order to plan their trip in the most efficient way (Accenture, 2017)

Second, **companies that have already adopted the customer-centered approach shows to customers how an experience can be enhanced**. For example, Amazon in the USA offer to deliver products in a short time at a very low cost in the doorstep and Starbucks showed customers the personalization concept (Deloitte, 2017).

Even though those companies belong to different categories, consumers can use their previous experience as benchmark. Deloitte mentioned (2017, p.6) “travel and hospitality brands will find themselves subject to the same expectations”.

Finally, another component that encouraged the shift to a consumer-center approach is the increasing internet usage. In the past five years, it had shown a steady growth (Statista, 2018). Internet now is part of the ZMOT\(^4\) during the purchase decision-making process of consumers (Google, 2011).

### 2.2.1 Google’s customer purchase journey

Nowadays, companies, consultants, and research agencies had proposed models that aim to understand consumer’s decision-making path related to purchasing activities. Those models usually are called *Consumer Purchase Journey, Consumer Decision Journey* or *Consumer Path to Purchase*.

In 2011, Google introduced the ZMOT model that proposed four stages: stimulus, ZMOT, first moment of truth (FMOT), and second moment of truth. See figure 2.

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\(^4\) Zero Moment of Truth is that moment when you grab your laptop, mobile phone or some other wired device and start learning about a product or service (or potential boyfriend) you’re thinking about trying or buying. Google (2011)
The stimulus consists in the first time that the consumer hears about a brand, when browsing online or on an offline ad such as magazine, television or event. Afterward, the **ZMOT occurs when the consumer starts to look online for further information** about that company, brand, product or service.

Google proposed the first moment of truth when the consumer has the first tangible experience with the product or brand, for instance when he looks at the product package or talks to a salesperson in the store. Finally, the second moment of truth is experienced when the consumer tries the product. (Google, 2011)

It is important to mention that Google applied its model in the retail industry, being focused on products. Nevertheless, some concepts of the ZMOT model can be applicable for the services industry. To complement the theoretical framework other customer journey models will be presented.
2.2.2 McKinsey’s customer purchase journey

McKinsey & Company was another pioneer in building customer purchase journey that offers other companies an overview of their customers' decision making before purchase and its variables.

In 2009, the consultant proposed a decision-making process that considerate four main stages (see figure 3). The first is the initial **consideration** when the consumers take account of different brands; then comes the **evaluation** phase, when they gather more information about a narrower set of brands. Afterward is the **purchase step** followed by the **post-purchase** when they make a judgment based on their experience (Court, 2009 et al).

![Figure 3. The consumer decision journey](source)

**Source:** Court, 2009

Six years after, McKinsey renamed it *the new consumer decision journey*, argumenting that nowadays the consumer is tech-savvy enough to start the journey directly in the evaluation phase, merging consideration and evaluation phase moments in one (See figure 4).
Edelman (2015, p. 5) proposes that some companies are able to “compress the consideration and evaluation phases—and in some cases even eliminate them—during the purchase process and catapult a consumer right to the loyalty phase of the relationship”.

An example is the Wizz Air Trip Planner, a new feature at wizzair.com that allows users to personalize their trip with filters based on “holiday category, origin airport, date, trip duration and budget” (Wizz Air, 2017, p.2). This platform enables to both get inspiration (trigger) and also to evaluate.

### 2.2.3 Influenced customer purchase journey

Another model to explain the customer decision-making process is called the *Influencer Journey*. As it can be seen in figure 5, the journey is strongly influenced by digital channels and online media are involved in the stages prior the purchase.
The Influencer Journey is based in five main stages, starting with the **awareness phase** in which online media, offline media and word of mouth are the first touchpoint of the company with the customer. After being aware of the service’s existence, the model proposes a **consideration phase** when the customer looks for additional information in the company's social channels and reviews sites.

As a third phase, the model proposed the **purchase** of the product or service in the company’s website or the store. Finally, the model suggests that after the purchase the relation hasn’t ended with the customers. They can be **retained and potentially converted into brand advocates** by using marketing strategies such as newsletters, blog, promotions and social networks.

### 2.2.4 Relation between customer journeys

To an overview of the theoretical framework, table 1 exposes the stages, points of parity and differences between the four customer journey models previously presented.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model, author, year</th>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Points of difference</th>
<th>Points in common</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| ZMOT Google (2011)  | Stimulus ZMOT FMOT SMOT | Propose the existence of a stimulus that triggers the customers intention to buy. | **E-WOM** plays a influencer role in the whole decision-making process (Markos-Kujbus, 2017). In fact, the last step of a consumer's journey can be the first of other. As Deloitte (2016, p.3) affirms “the consumer journey has changed from a linear path to a cycle, where each consumer’s experience feeds into another consumer’s decision process”.
|                     |        |                      | Customers can be converted into **brand advocates** if the company has loyalty programs (and offered an experience of quality). Deloitte mentions accurately “every consumer is a potential “evangelist” or critic” (2016, p. 3).
| **The Customer Decision Journey** McKinsey (2009) | Consideration Evaluation Purchase Post-purchase experience Loyalty loop | First the consumers need to hear about the brand so then they consider buying it and proceed with the evaluation versus other competing brands. | **The brand’s online presence** is relevant for the decision when the customer is browsing. **Online reviews** are influencing customers decision-making process. In fact, these sites empower the consumer by changing from a company focused to a consumer-centered approach. (Deloitte, 2016) |
| **The Accelerated Loyalty Journey** McKinsey (2015) | Consider-evaluate Buy Experience Advocate Bond | Affirms that the customer’s decision is based on **evaluation**, and they consider buying a brand once they have evaluated it. | |
| **Influencer Journey** Roy (2015) | Awareness Consideration Purchase Retention Advocacy | Proposes the integration of **own media** such as social media, website or blogs to get in touch with potential customers. Suggests that the customer relationship can last longer (retention) using some marketing strategies such as newsletters, blog or promotions. | |

Table 1. Analysis of different Customer Journey models

Source: own creation based on information provided by authors mentioned.
2.3 Digital marketing for hospitality brands

Nowadays, when the consumer “visits 38 sites before booking” (Orson, 2015 cited on Peterson, 2015) hotel, lodging companies, and other informal businesses (Airbnb) have the opportunity to be discovered if they have built an online presence.

According to Statistic Brain (2017), 57% of today’s bookings occur online, therefore marketers specialized in hospitality consider building an online strategy to reach out their potential customers.

If a hospitality business wants to stay competitive in the current scenario where the customer is empowered, and the emerging models (sharing economy) are gaining market share, it should consider that:

1) Hotels that offer a brand experience and work on their branding can reach higher brand recognition and in the long run brand loyalty (Manthiou, Kang, Sumarjan & Tang, 2017)

2) Online branding is a way to get more brand exposure, especially on search and social (Kissmetrics, 2014)

To build a brand online, marketers propose to take into consideration the main channels where the customers are. Using every touchpoint as an opportunity to connect with them.

2.3.1 Website

As lodging and hotels form part of the services industry, the touchpoints with the customers are important to build the total experience. A website is one of the first points of contact with the potential buyer, and it can influence the final booking decision.

Authors focused on UX design\(^5\) state that a quality website encompasses to usability and functionality (Yeung and Law, 2004 cited on Ali, 2016). In addition to the design, information is also important in the hotels' website, Forbes (2017) indicates that in the

\(^5\) Process of creating products that provide meaningful and personally relevant experiences. This involves the careful design of both a product’s usability and the pleasure consumers will derive from using it. (Interaction Design Foundation, 2018, p.1)
homepage shall be shown the most relevant information for the customer in order to make a decision.

Pictures of the rooms, the exterior of the hotel, location, prices, reservation box and qualifying data are information that must appear in the homepage (Forbes, 2017).

Another component that is a *nice to have* and might make the difference between choosing a hotel or other, is the content. If it is valuable or entertaining it can acquire or retain customers. For instance, Airbnb offers value to its customers with its blog (blog.airbnb.com) focused on hosts but intended to offer advice and reach a higher quality service.

When firms play a content producers’ role to fulfill consumer needs is called content marketing. Defined by the Content Marketing Institute (2011, p. 1) as a “strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action”.

**2.3.2 Social media**

According to Statista (2018), 2.6 billion persons are internet users that spend daily 135 minutes on social media. In the decision-making process for booking services, social media have an important role since they foster knowledge sharing between past tourists, locals and future tourists. (Chan and Guillet, 2011 cited in Pınar, & Murat, 2016)

Forbes (2017) suggest hoteliers and other hospitality entrepreneurs to be present on Instagram and Facebook. As visual platforms they offer the opportunity to take a closer look of the accommodation so the potential guest knows what to expect.

The rise of Instagram usage has been leveraged by hospitality brands, such as Airbnb that launched an influencer campaign with big celebrities like Mariah Carey and Martin Garrix, being shown in their mansions rented through Airbnb and promoted on Instagram Ads.
Campaigns based on user-generated content and influencers nowadays can be measured by social media platforms and “go beyond mere conversions/sales, such as cost per thousand impressions (CPM), inbound links, and lead growth” (Quach, 2017, p.1).

Online media also serve for reputation management, customer complaints or suggestions can be found on OTAs, forums or comments in social media. Hotels can have a better understanding of the customers perception towards them and their competitors (Leung, Law, Van Hoof & Bugalis, 2013).

A proper management of socials can help services brands to recover from a bad experience by offering another reward. That might prevent a negative e-WOM.

Moreover, social media allow the publication of video-based campaigns, which can serve as a trigger that inspires customers to travel or to persuade them for booking on a specific accommodation. Video-based platforms like Facebook and Youtube nowadays have become also relevant since “66% of travelers watched travel-related videos before booking their trip and videos give people a better sense of authenticity”. (Forbes, 2017, p. 2)

2.3.3 Search Engine Optimization

Prognosis digital (2015 cited in Halpern & Fazzini, 2015) found out that 96% of the travelers start planning their trip with a Google Search. Hence, hospitality marketers have increased their attention in ranking better so their hotels can be part of the first SERPs (search engine result page).

Optimizing a website to rank better in Google means higher traffic that can be turned into leads. Lee (2013, p.1) suggests that “top listing in Google’s organic search results receives 33 percent of the traffic”.

Running AdWord campaigns are not enough for having a higher rank in Google. Its algorithm also consists of a bunch of factors that determine the relevance of the site. If a brand wants to work on its search engine optimization (SEO) it needs to take into account
the website's content and speed, keywords optimization, meta tags, backlinks (other sites that have directed to this site), and other technical aspects (Forbes, 2012).

Building an online presence can serve as another touchpoint so the hospitality business can be present on the set of options when the potential customer is browsing for options. For that, the hospitality manager shall take into consideration the channels where the customers are and promote their business through those media.
3. Research methodology

3.1 Objectives and research questions

As customers keep changing the way they buy, influenced by emerging digital platforms and multiple touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) their customer journey map also needs to be readjusted.

Concepts like e-WOM, influencer marketing, user-generated content and SEO had gained power when customers make a booking or purchase decision. Compared to models from ten years ago, today’s models take into consideration other senders of the communication, and not only the firm as the main factor that shapes their decision.

Nowadays, the hospitality ecosystem is complex and highly innovative firms focus on the personalization of experiences (Accenture, 2017). Therefore, a single customer journey can’t be applied to every industry. Services companies that seek to enhance customer experience, run their own research to discover potential pain points, channels, feelings and thoughts during customer purchase decisions.

For all the above situations, the present paper aims to analyze the booking customer’s journey in the hospitality industry. The specific research questions are listed below:

**RQ 1** What are the touchpoints during the customers’ booking journey?

**RQ 2** What are the key drivers for booking?

**RQ 3** What is the role of the brand's digital channels in the customer decision journey for booking accommodations?

**RQ 4** What are the phases of the customer journey when booking an accommodation?

**RQ 5** How do customers form expectations in regards to a future accommodation?
3.2 Relevance of the research

Companies like Amazon and Google have integrated into their management boards customer experience (CX) positions responsible for understanding, generating and enhancing the experience between the firms and the customers (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016)

Part of their duties is mapping the customer experiences, Tony Costa (2014, p. 1) explains the importance of this tool since “they are a foundational document that forms the backbone of CX programs”.

The purchase journey map establishes a visual representation of the touchpoints between a customer and a brand or service. Having a deeper understanding of the customer with the map can help to narrow the Service Gaps related to the customer's expectations.

Mapping the customer journey from the early moments of the trip planning until the post-booking stage can be insightful to track the different moments of truth in the hospitality industry.

3.3 Assumptions

First, as digital platforms usage kept increasing in the past years and 87% of the accommodation bookings are made online (Google, 2014, p.28), the present study will consider that the customer journey takes place mostly in digital platforms.

Second, as an observation will be complemented with an interview to explore past travel experiences and current booking habits, it will be assumed that each customer has a certain protocol for booking, i.e. normally they check the same OTAs or sites.

3.4 Research design

Consultants and authors whose research aims to map a customer journey, suggest using qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observations, and workshops (Michela Addis, 2015).

To answer the research questions, participant observations and semi-structured interviews will be applied as qualitative methodologies.
For the customer journey mapping, the structure presented below will serve as guidance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps to build a booking journey</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Define personas</td>
<td>Define target group according to sociodemographic factors and online affinity.</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize touchpoints</td>
<td>Determine touchpoints that the previously selected group of customers has with the hostel, hotel or B&amp;B.</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define moments of truth</td>
<td>Discover important phases of the process that have an impact on the customer’s decision.</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine influencers</td>
<td>Create a list of departments and persons with whom the customer comes into contact.</td>
<td>Observation and interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record customer journeys</td>
<td>Post-observation and recreation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Steps to build a customer journey and methodology

Source. Own creation, based on CX Omni consultant

The customer journey might start as a reconstruction of assumptions from the firm about its touchpoints with the customer. However, in order to have a valid representation of a customer journey, research is needed.

Observations and semi-structured interviews were applied as main methodologies since the aim of the present research is to map how does the customer book (Jurgulyte, E & Böhlke, R, 2017).
Moreover, authors specialized in journey mapping suggest to apply semi-structured interviews, participant observations or workshops to disclose the touchpoints and thoughts on each stage (Michela Addis, 2015).

Visual research methods such as collaborative video, drawing objects, multimedia production and video recording are nowadays applied as qualitative methods to understand customers behavior (Mitchell, 2011).

Therefore, nine people who have traveled in the past six months and planning to travel in the current year will be selected for a semi-structured interview and a case observation.

The interview will be divided in three parts: sociodemographic information, recalling their last trip and expectations (see questions on appendix 1). The first part aims to understand general information of the interviewees such as their age, nationality, profession and social media activity.

In the second part the questions will explore the decisions-making process during their last booking. It aims to discover their reasons to travel, influencers, platforms browsed and key drivers for the final decision.

Finally, the third section will examine the elements that help them to form expectations prior the experience but also will explore the post-experience. After the interviews, a short case will be set for the participants for the observation part. The case is the following:

_Imagine it is time to plan your next trip, now you need to select an accommodation. Feel free to open all the tabs needed and log in to your social media accounts. Take your time and keep with the procedure until the payment is needed._

The booking processes will be screen recorded and later will serve as a base to elaborate the customer journey.
4. Customer Journeys’ analysis

The analysis of the observations and interviews was based on table 2. It defined the personas according to their sociodemographic, and determined touchpoints, moments of truth, and potential influencers.

As the booking journeys varied between customers (Maechler, N., Neher, K., & Park, R., 2016) it was decided to examine and present the cases individually. It facilitated the creation of a cross-case analysis chart (figure 15) which showed points of parity and difference between the analyzed journeys.

Certainly, the literature review served as baseline to build the individual booking journeys, nevertheless it wasn’t found a booking journey for accommodations which set a base for the present analysis. Therefore the individual observations came first and afterwards it was possible to detect patterns.

The presentation style of the individual and cross-case analysis was inspired by two academic papers with similar research objectives, just differentiated by industry. Those are mentioned below:

1. **Rethinking Individual Customer Journeys Exploration Across Age Groups In A Digitised Retail Industry.** The authors applies an abductive approach combining theories and data-based inductive logics from semi-structured interviews (Jurgulyte, E & Böhlke, R, 2017, p. 3).

2. **Describing shopping experience with customer journey maps for digital service design.** The author applied semi-structured interviews to define shopping experiences and major touchpoints so finally they can recreate buyer personas (Yi Wang, 2013)
4.1 Individual cases

This section will present the individual customer journeys built by the information provided during the interviews and the case observation on how do they book an accommodation.

All the interviewees traveled in the past six months and are planning to travel sometime in the current year. See the detail below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Digital platforms used to book</th>
<th>Average budget per night</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Evokia Bairampa</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Content Manager</td>
<td>Booking.com</td>
<td>€ 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Linda Jenssen</td>
<td>Holland</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Booking.com</td>
<td>€ 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mátyás Környei</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Operations Manager</td>
<td>Airbnb.com, Booking.com</td>
<td>€ 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Edward Sice</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>IT Consultant</td>
<td>Hostelworld.com, Booking.com</td>
<td>€ 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Michelle Moreira</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Booking.com, Hostels.com</td>
<td>€ 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Shamil Mikayilli</td>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Part-time job</td>
<td>Booking.com, Google search</td>
<td>€ 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Anna Glukhova</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Ostrovok.ru, Google search, Booking.com</td>
<td>€ 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Muhidin Rizki</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Student, part-time job</td>
<td>Booking.com</td>
<td>€ 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kristof Környei</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Couchsurfing.com, Airbnb.com, MrBnB.com</td>
<td>€ 21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Participants information

Source. Own creation
Case 1 (Evdokia)

Touchpoints

During the observation, the first touch point observed was booking.com and the action taken was to set filters according to her trip preferences.

Her evaluation criteria consisted in choosing a center-located accommodation, around 60 euros per night and with more than 8 points of rating. When she found a possible option, she checked pictures on booking.com but also on the hotel’s website, she affirms:

“I usually check the pictures on booking.com and if I want to explore more then I go to the hotel’s website”.

Browsing the website to explore further information can be understood as the consideration or exploration phase. After looking for pictures in the website she confirmed that the accommodation is suitable for her needs; then she decided to book.

Moments of truth

During the interview, Evdokia mentioned that her last trip was inspired by a colleague’s recommendation. After that occurred the zero moment of truth when Evdokia was browsing on booking.com and checking options based on reviews, rating, and location.

The first moment of truth appeared when she went to the hotel’s website to explore further information and check more pictures. As it was mentioned previously, lodging and hotels belong to the services industry, so its touchpoints with the customers are important to build the total experience.

The second moment of truth occurred once she tried the hotel, she was satisfied with the services and amenities since it was similar than she saw in the pictures.
In this case, the hotel fulfilled the goal of closing the fourth gap in the *Gap Model of Service Quality* between expectation built by communications and actual service delivered. Hence she left a positive review.

At the final process of booking, she mentioned that usually, she asks her boyfriend for a final approval.

![Figure 6. Case 1 customer journey](source: own illustration)

**Case 2 (Linda)**

**Touchpoints**

Linda started her journey on booking.com, adding the filters in order to show hotels with a +8 rating and ordering the most affordable from the top. After the evaluation phase, Linda started to consider few options. She affirmed that usually she gather all the data (pictures, reviews, description, etc.) to make decision on booking.com, so there is no need to use an alternative platform.
Moments of truth

What triggered Linda’s intention to buy was to find a cheap flight to Thailand on Skyscanner and also the curiosity to explore Asia. Again, in this case, the stimulus to buy was not triggered by an ad, but it is correlated to a flight ticket cheap deal.

The ZMOT occurred when she started looking for accommodations in booking.com and checking reviews. She mentioned that “to trust a rating from a hotel it needs to have more than 200 reviews in total”. It reaffirms the relevance of the electronic word of mouth in the decision-making process (Markos-Kujbus, 2017).

Her first moment of truth also occurred in booking.com when she reviewed more pictures, reviews, and hotel amenities, in this case, own media of the hotel wasn’t a source to build expectations. As the Gap model of service quality indicates, the expected service is influenced by electronic word of mouth. She confirmed that the reviews matched with the real service provided, therefore she was satisfied but she didn’t write any review.

Figure 7. Case 2 customer journey

Source: Own illustration
Case 3 (Mátyás)

Touchpoints

His first touch point with a digital platform to start the journey occurred on booking.com. Since the filters he added offered too narrow results then he shifted to Airbnb. After finding a suitable accommodation on Airbnb he proceeded to reserve it on the same platform.

Moments of truth

His stimulus consisted of having found a cheap flight to Tel-Aviv. The ZMOT was when he started browsing and evaluating the options in booking.com and airbnb.com. The FMOT happened when he found more affordable options in Airbnb and he browsed more pictures to have a better idea of what to expect.

Finally, the SMOT occurred when he stayed in the accommodation and mentioned: “the room was not as the pictures, but the host was so helpful so altogether was great”. Reaffirming that the guest’s satisfaction is highly related to their expectations and the real service provided (Šambronská, 2013).

Figure 8. Case 3 Customer Journey

Source: Own illustration
Case 4 (Edward)

Touchpoints

In the observation, he started the journey on booking.com adding filters and criteria based on price and top reviews. He opened different tabs and kept shifting tabs of three different accommodations until he found the best option assessed by a 9.0 of overall reviews.

Moments of truth

During the interview he expressed that the last time he traveled was to celebrate a bachelor party. As he was in charge of booking an accommodation for a group of 6 people initially he looked in booking (ZMOT), finding out that none option fitted his needs. Then he shifted to hostelworld.com where he found different options.

To get further information of the hostel found in hostelworld.com he also checked the website:

"In hostelworld I read all the reviews so I knew that I shouldn't expect anything bad. After I went to the hostel's website just to have some more information, more pictures, and to double-check”

This case confirms the importance of having a site online, as Chan and Law (2006) indicate in Csordas (2014) it works to be in touch with the consumers and potentially be an option when they browse for an accommodation.

Since the hospitality is not part of the retail industry (where the FMOT is when a customer takes a look at the shelf) the FMOT in this context happens when the customer browses the hostel’s website. The SMOT for Edward was satisfactory as the hotel accomplished the promises read beforehand in the reviews and the hostel description.
Figure 9. Case 4 Customer Journey

Source: Own illustration

Case 5 (Michelle)

Touchpoints

During the observation three main touchpoints were recognized: booking.com, hostels.com and Facebook. Michelle started browsing on booking.com and shifted to hostels.com. Once she found a good deal, she looked for its Facebook page to see more pictures.

In this case, hotel’s social media played an important role for the final decision. It was indicated by Kissmetrics blog (2014) that online branding is a way to get more brand exposure.

Moments of truth

During the interview, Michelle mentioned that as soon as she booked the tickets to Paris, she started to look for accommodations. The ZMOT happened when she started to look in parallel on Airbnb and booking.com.

After finding a good deal in booking.com she sticked to it and looked for further information in the hostel’s website.
The **FMOT** occurred when she formed an idea of the hostel thanks to the website (which looked trustworthy and was on her language). Also she checked the hostels’ Facebook page to view more pictures (uploaded by other users).

The **SMOT** occurred when she stayed at the hotel, realising that the service expected matched the reality. The only negative aspect was that other guests in the room didn't let her sleep, therefore she wrote a review mentioning that fact.

Finally, she **talked about the importance of the price when making expectations** “if I paid 25 euros I can't demand much, just cleanliness, good location and free wifi”.

![Figure 10. Case 5 Customer Journey](image)

**Source:** Own illustration

### Case 6 (Shamil)

**Touchpoints**

During the observation, Shamil started his journey searching on Google *hostels Vienna*, clicking on the first website that popped out in the results (hostelworld.com). As he found a good deal and the complete information in the site he didn't checked other websites.
Moments of truth

The stimulus was to visit his cousin and to explore the city. The zero moment of truth occurred when he browsed in booking.com and the platform suggested a hotel based on his previous travel information. Also, it was mentioned that he based his decision on the information and location rather than reviews since he consider that they are biased.

The FMOT happened when he looked for the hotel in Google Maps to have a clearer picture of where it was located and how it looks like. Also he went to the hotel’s website to check if it has a payment system. Nevertheless, Shamil booked on booking.com since the hotel site asked to log in and go through a series of steps to book. Finally the SMOT took place when he stayed at the hotel and he shared a Instagram story.

![Customer Journey Diagram](image)

**Figure 11.** Case 6 Customer Journey

**Source:** Own illustration

Case 7 (Anna)

**Touchpoints**

Anna started her search in Google with the keyword *Moscow hotel* finding out that booking.com was the first website that appeared, so she clicked on it. Also she looked on the Russian site called Ostrovok.ru where she found a hostel where she previously stayed.
At the end she didn't find a better deal than the hostel she already knew so she decided to book it. Like the Services Gap Model indicates, previous experience form expectation in the customer's mind.

Despite she knew had a experience in the hostel before, she checked if other accommodation offered a greater deal. OTAs might decrease the customer loyalty since it is a continuous evaluation.

Likewise Accenture indicates: “new entrants such as online travel agencies (OTA), meta-search engines and booking platforms are harnessing technological developments to build digital platforms that aggressively disrupt the value chain”. (2017, p.7)

Moments of truth

The travelling decision was triggered by finishing her semester successfully (self-reward) so she decided to visit Prague. One of her friends recommended a hostel where she stayed in the past, that was the stimulus. The ZMOT in this case didn't lasted much since she went straight to book in the hostel’s site without checking further reviews.

The FMOT occurred when she visited the hostel’s site and liked the interface and the payment system that was easy to use. Similarly than Forbes (2017) indicated: prices, reservation box and qualifying data (reviews) should appear in the homepage as it may form the customer's first impression about the accomodation.

Anna affirmed “ for that price the hostel was ok and well located, plus clean”. As well as the case 6, she also talked about that the price helped her to form expectations.
Figure 12. Case 7 Customer Journey

Source: Own illustration

Case 8 (Rizki)

Touchpoints

During the observation Rizki went to booking.com to look for the accommodation, all the moments of truth occurred on the same platform. He mentioned that if he would plan this trip with more than three friends they would go for Airbnb that usually is cheaper. It is important to highlight that the occasion and company can influence the booking journey.

Moments of truth

He was triggered to visit Liechtenstein since none of his Indonesian friends has gone and he wanted to be the first. His ZMOT started in booking since he mentioned that is one of the cheapest OTA and it is user friendly. Also he mentioned that the reviews are less biased because those who wrote a review must have had an experience and not like TripAdvisor.

He said that at the beginning he was planning to do a one-day-trip, but he found a 50% in an accommodation on booking.com so he decided to stay.

Part of the ZMOT was to read reviews, but in this case, he found more important to check the negative first:
“First I read negative reviews because I want to set my expectations, I want to know what is the worse I can expect”

Also part of the ZMOT is when he checked maps, reviews, and pictures in booking.com to explore in detail the accommodation. The FMOT occurred on booking.com when he looked up for cancellation policies and read the full description of the hotel. Finally, the SMOT was his experience in the apartment which he evaluated as positive, having just one inconvenient about the longer distance that was not expected. Rizki left a review indicating the situation but ranking it higher than 8 points.

![Case 8 Customer Journey](image)

**Figure 13.** Case 8 Customer Journey

**Source:** Own illustration

**Case 9 (Kristof)**

**Touchpoints**

Kristof specified that his first touchpoint with a potential accommodation is Couchsurfing and if he doesn’t find a host then he goes to Airbnb. He explained his preference to Airbnb among other paid platforms since he finds valuable the hosts’ guidance.
Moments of truth

Recalling his last trip, he mentioned that his decision was triggered by the winter holidays. The ZMOT occurred when he browsed on Mister BandB (a similar platform like Airbnb but gay-friendly) but he realized that Airbnb has more options and was more affordable.

He mentioned that the key characteristics for assessing an accommodation are the location, price, and reviews. His FMOT occured when he looked for more pictures and see further descriptions.

The SMOT was during his stay in the accommodation, he confirmed that his expectations made by the map and the reviews were fulfilled, he left a review in Airbnb.

![Figure 14. Case 9 Customer Journey](source: Own illustration)

4.2 Cross-case analysis

The present chapter synthesizes the findings of the previous analyzed cases. It shows points in common across cases, and patterns in regards of touchpoints, booking stages and expectations.

The following figure offers an cross-case visualization of the online platforms used in the five identified stages: stimulus, evaluation or comparison, exploration, booking, and in some cases, sharing.
4.3 Booking phases

The present section aims to take a closer look of the booking stages that are applicable to the nine cases and will reflect to the customer journey’s theories exposed on the literature review.

4.3.1 Stimulus to book

In the cases observed it wasn't recognized an awareness phase, **the drivers were related to location, price, and reviews** rather than brand recognition.
The stimulus or trigger to start considering to book and accommodation in the cases reviewed differed from the model proposed by Google. In this cases, the stimulus came from external factors such as holidays or finding a cheap ticket flight. Just in the case 8 was identified a triggered by a hotel promotion.

This can be identified as a stimulus, as the concept named by Google (2011) in its ZMOT model, differing by the fact that the consumer heard about the destination but not about the hotel brand.

Other difference from the ZMOT model is that Google affirmed that the stimulus is caused by the company’s communication, such as an ad. In this case, the stimulus came from an outsider of the hospitality firm.

4.3.2 Evaluation phase

The next stage recognized was when the customers set the filters or criteria to evaluate and compare the available options. Therefore in the present research, it is called evaluation phase. As figure 15 shows, during this stage, OTAs, metasearch engines, and Airbnb are the top players.

Cases 3, 5, 9 and 7 run the comparison in different websites (i.e. airbnb vs. booking.com), suggesting that the evaluation occur within platforms and also across them.

As McKinsey indicated in the The New Customer Decision Journey (see figure 4), the customers’ journey started directly in the evaluation phase. It was mentioned before: “the consumer is tech-savvy enough to start the journey directly in the evaluation phase”.

4.3.3 Exploration phase

It was identified that after the customers had a narrower set of options they took a deeper look into its description, pictures, and reviews. Only the journey of case 2 and 8 took place entirely in booking.com, but the other 7 visited complementary sites for their final decision.
The website of the accommodation plays an important role during the exploration phase since customers expect to get further information than the OTA.

It is important to mention that in case 1, 7 and 9 when they explored more information about the accommodation and then they found a negative aspect (i.e. non-free cancellation, bad pictures of the place) they jumped back to the evaluation phase.

When users explored on booking.com, without having a deeper contact with the accommodation site, was interpreted as a prolonged ZMOT. While the users that went to the site and had a closer look to the accommodation, it was considered as FMOT.

4.3.4 Booking phase

When it was time to book, none interviewees did it through the accommodations’ site. All of them used OTAs or meta-search site, cases 6 and 8 indicated that they feel more secure booking on an OTA that they have used before.

4.3.5 Feedback or sharing phase

It was determined that 5 out of 9 cases wrote a review and they did it through booking.com or Airbnb. Even if they had a small inconvenient, all of them ranked the accommodation positively as they saw the entire experience as a whole.

In the cases 1 and 2, in which their budget was higher than average, they expressed their carefulness to make a review the most accurate as possible.

4.4 Touchpoints

The present section will show a visual representation of the browsing activity during the booking process. This section is based on the customer’s observation and was analyzed after their bookings were screen recorded. Each stage is explained graphically by iconic moments of the cases. More moments of truth per case can be found in appendix 2.

It answers RQ1, which refers to the related to touchpoints during the customer journey on digital platforms.
4.4.1 Evaluation’s touchpoints

Case 4, Booking.com

Case 8, Booking.com

Case 2, Booking.com

Case 7, Ostrovok

Case 3, Airbnb

Case 7, Google search

Case 9, Airbnb
The OTAs are predominant when evaluating different accommodations, in most of the cases they use filters to facilitate the search and to have more accurate options.

In all of the cases, when evaluating they used filters for distance, reviews, and price. That answers RQ1 about the key drivers that are important in the booking decision. Just two cases when the money spent per night was higher than 60 euros (case 1 and 2) they set additional filters such as swimming pool and breakfast.

Other sites that allowed the evaluation was Airbnb, with a similar interface than booking.com in terms of maps, and Google search. Nevertheless, Google search showed on the first result page booking.com so the user (case 6) ended up clicking on it.

**4.4.2 Exploration’s touchpoints**

Case 1, Booking.com  
Case 5, Facebook page  
Case 7, Google search  
Case 8, Hostels.com
During the exploration phase, the touchpoints were more diverse; users looked up on Facebook, hostel’s website, and different OTAs. Differently from the evaluation phase which was concentrated in few digital platforms.

The channels owned by the hospitality businesses play an important role during the exploration phase. For instance, cases 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7 looked for the accommodation’s website after hearing the first time about them.

Answering RQ 3, the role of the brand's digital channels in the journey is to provide additional information and content that will help the users to form an expectation about the place.
4.4.3 Booking phase: touchpoints

Similarly than the evaluation phase, the bookings took place in OTAs and Airbnb. It might happen as the reason mentioned in case 6 when he couldn't complete the payment since he wasn't logged in the hotel's site so it was easier to book through booking.com where he has already an account.

As it can be seen in figure 15, in some cases they jumped from an OTA to other websites in order to gather more information from different sources but when it was time to book most of them went back to the OTA and completed the payment.

4.5 Building expectations

The *Gap model of service quality* presented in the literature review introduced elements that help customers to form expectations for an accommodation, those are WOM, personal needs, previous experience and firm’s communication.
With the goal of responding RQ5, the table 4 shows the variables observed in the cases about how they form expectations about future accommodations, in the framework of the services marketing gap.

| Word of mouth | Decision of cases 2 and 7 were influenced by someone known (a friend). In the other seven cases electronic word of mouth was predominant. They leveraged platforms like booking.com and Airbnb to evaluate the accommodations based on reviews, maps and rating. Concepts like negative e-WOM were observed. Like case 8, who said “I also read negative reviews to know the worst I can expect”.

| Personal needs | Customers have some basic needs when it comes to an accommodation. Such as cleanliness, location and internet. Just cases 1 and 2 demanded extra amenities like swimming pool, privacy and closeness to the lake. In this cases the money spent per nights was higher than average. The purchasing power is also key in making expectations. Cases 5, 7 and 8 talked about having basic expectations since the accommodation booked was very affordable.

| Previous experience | All the cases but 6 and 7 (who made a Google search) went straight to their preferred OTA or to Airbnb. As they were familiar with the interface and the booking process. As it was mentioned before, location, cleanliness and internet connection were basic amenities expected based on their previous experiences.

| Firm’s communications | During the interviews, the customers expressed the importance of visual elements and descriptions to build expectations. Maps and pictures give them the feeling of being there. Also, the quality of the
website was important, in case 5 she mentioned that her final decision was triggered by finding a website in her language. As a difference from the Gap model of service quality, not only the firm’s channels communicate the core messages but also OTAs play an important role on it.

OTAs are an additional sender that gets in touch with the potential customers, therefore the information and content offered on this sites also help the customers to form expectations.

Table 4. Variables to build expectations

Source: own elaboration
5. Limitations and further research

Certainly, the present research offers an approach of how the digital and empowered customers book an accommodation. Nevertheless, there are some considerations that need to be taken into account:

1) The research did not analyzed any case of booking a luxurious hotel. Therefore it was not observed any extraordinary expectation or (probably) loyalty to a brand.
2) In just one case the traveler was going to a known destination, for others the destination was new. Therefore they spent time evaluating carefully the options.
3) The life stage of the interviews might be influential, most of them were single and without kids, hence it can affect their evaluation phase.
6. Conclusions and recommendations

After analyzing the nine cases and cross-checking them with the Customer Journey theories, relevant insights were found. They might be useful for the accommodation owners and for researchers interested in customer behavior in the hospitality industry.

The findings were divided by topic, being exposed below:

In respect of the Customer Journey:

1. The zero moment of truth proposed by Google is applicable in the booking process. All the customers spent the majority of their time in this moment. Probably, when it comes to purchasing a good or service --when the customers don't have physical contact with a brand’s tangible asset the online experience is prolonged and the ZMOT’s relevance is intensified.

2. From McKinsey's customer purchase model, the concept of compressing evaluation and consideration phases is applicable. In cases 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9 (see figure 15) the customers jumped back and forth to evaluate, check more information and evaluate again. Therefore, evaluation and exploration/consideration should not be understood as two completely separated phases.

3. From the Influencer Customer Journey, concepts like the importance of e-commerce and having an own website are applicable. In the present research was observed that the hotel's and hostel’s own websites were part of the evaluation an exploration process. The hostels who managed to give a “good impression” confirmed their quality so the customers proceed with the booking.

4. In none of the cases it was observed the loyalty loop or brand advocacy proposed by Customer Journey theories. OTAs might decrease the loyalty for a specific hotel chain since they offer wider options to explore more accommodations.
About booking.com as predominant OTA:

1. In most of the cases, booking.com was “the place” where the whole process happened. **Booking.com has great knowledge of its customers so it helps them to develop strategies which drive more sales.** For instance, in many cases, customers start looking for accommodation right after they book a flight (see figure 15). Booking.com already spotted it and in compliance with some airlines, booking.com promotions appear in the flight confirmation emails (See appendix 3).

2. **Booking.com is capitalizing ZMOTs.** It is the first option that pops up when running a Google search and typing hostels + destination or when looking for Otrosovok.com (Russian OTA). Booking.com optimizes its page results on Google by fast page speed, user interface, and AdWords campaigns (See appendix 4).

3. Together with other OTAs and Airbnb, **booking.com is improving ZMOTs,** not only by offering tools to evaluate accurately but also by designing a friendly and easy-to-use interface.

About the trends and their implications for hotel/hostel’s business:

1. **The OTAs seem to be the “digital retailers” of the hospitality industry.** As none of the cases booked through the hotel's website, the hospitality managers should consider paying OTA’s so they will be present on those channels when the customer is looking for an accommodation.

2. **Negative e-WOM is influential in the decision-making process to book.** In most of the cases the search was filtered by rating and reviews, so automatically the hostels with lower ratings were discarded. It is recommended to hospitality businesses to make sure that their guests left the place with a positive impression, otherwise, it would be convenient to offer something as a compensation to prevent negative e-WOM.

3. **Accurate communication helps to decrease the gap between expectations and actual service delivered.** The descriptions and content consulted before booking
helps the customer to form expectations beforehand. Customers expect to receive more information on the accommodations official website so hospitality owners can leverage this moment to show the most accurate and high-quality content.

In conclusion, it is recommended to hospitality managers to create a mixed marketing strategy considering owned and paid channels for their communication. Owned channels can be a website or Facebook page. It is also recommended to offer high-quality content such as pictures or videos so the customers form a better image of the place. In this context, paid or “distribution” channels mean OTAs. It is suggested to be present on Booking.com or hostelworld.com. In this way, hospitality businesses will cover the touchpoints with the customers and will be present during their moments of truth.
7. References


Markos-Kujbus, É. (2016). Online word-of-mouth features of marketing communication. Corvinus University of Budapest, School of Management.


8. Appendix

8.1 Interviews’ questions

General information

1. How old are you?
2. What is your profession?
3. Which level of education do you have?
4. Where are you from?
5. How many social media are you active on?

Recalling their last trip

6. When was the last time you traveled?
7. What was the reason that your travel?
8. Who did you travel with?
9. How did you decide to go to that destination?
10. When did you decide that this accommodation was “the one”?
11. Was someone else part of the final decision to book?

About expectations

12. How did you form the expectations of that hotel? (friends, website, photos, etc).
13. How did you like this hotel/b&b/house?
14. Did the accommodation fulfilled your expectations? Why?
15. Would you write a review about this hotel? Where?
8.2 Moments of booking

All the moments are captures of the screen record during the observations. They show relevant moments during the customer journey.

Case 1 (Evdokia)
Case 2 (Linda)
Case 3 (Mátyás)
Case 4 (Edward)
Case 5 (Michelle)
Case 6 (Shamil)
Case 7 (Anna)
Case 8 (Rizki)
Case 9 (Kristof)