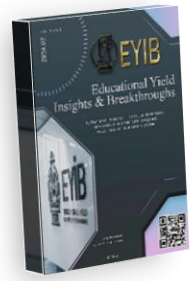
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THE INFLUENCE OF ONLINE REVIEWS AND RATINGS ON MILLENNIALS' HOTEL CHOICES

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Annotatsiya

This study investigates how online user reviews and rating scores shape the accommodation choices of Millennials. Using the structural IMRAD framework, the paper combines a review of current hospitality literature with a descriptive analysis of two informal online polls. The first poll (142 participants) evaluated the perceived weight of different review elements, while the second poll (165 participants) identified platform trust. The results reveal a strong negativity bias: 64% of respondents prioritize recent negative feedback over high overall scores. Furthermore, verified transactional platforms like Booking.com are trusted significantly more (68%) than open community forums. The findings suggest that modern independent travelers prioritize risk reduction and transactional security over traditional hotel marketing.

Kalit so‘zlar: Millennials, online reviews, hotel choice, consumer trust, eWOM, IMRAD framework.

INTRODUCTION

Digital word-of-mouth (eWOM) has completely replaced traditional travel agencies and official hotel brochures in the modern tourism sector (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Potential guests no longer rely on self-reported marketing messages created by hotel brands. Instead, they evaluate alternatives by examining crowdsourced data, real-time guest photographs, and text-based feedback left by previous customers (Filieri & McLeay, 2014). This shift in consumer behavior means that a hotel's reputation is no longer static; it is constantly co-created and updated by the public internet community (Litvin et al., 2008).

This dynamic is particularly critical for the Millennial generation. Having spent their formative years during the rapid expansion of the digital economy, this cohort relies heavily on peer validation for almost all purchasing decisions (Smith, 2012). In the context of hospitality, a hotel property with no visible online track record is often filtered out immediately. However, the decision-making process is highly nuanced. A simple numerical star rating is rarely enough to secure a booking; travelers actively read between the lines of text reviews to evaluate variables like room cleanliness, Wi-Fi reliability, and staff behavior.

Several empirical studies have explored electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in tourism. For instance, recent research highlighted that visual content uploaded by actual guests carries far more psychological weight than curated corporate imagery (Sparkcentral, 2020). Other studies have noted that younger cohorts demonstrate a higher capability to spot fake or sponsored reviews compared to older generations (O'Connor, 2010). However, most existing research focuses on specific geographic regions or high-income populations. This present paper addresses this gap by providing an exploratory snapshot of review utilization patterns among a specific online community, placing local poll data alongside established academic concepts.

1.1. Aim and research question

The primary aim of this study is to analyze how online review elements influence the hotel selection process of young independent travelers.

Research Question: How do online customer reviews shape the accommodation choices of Millennials, and which platforms do they perceive as the most credible sources of information?

A secondary objective is to discuss these behavioral patterns in relation to older generational cohorts (such as Baby Boomers) using secondary literature sources.

2. METHODS (METHODOLOGY)

2.1. Research Design

This study utilizes an exploratory, descriptive research design. The methodology combines a structured review of published empirical literature with a quantitative secondary analysis of data gathered from two informal online polls. The literature review establishes the necessary theoretical foundation regarding eWOM and consumer trust (Filieri et al., 2015). Meanwhile, the online polls provide recent, localized empirical data to test if actual consumer preferences align with broader academic models.

2.2. Participants and Data Collection

Data collection took place over a two-week period using cross-sectional online polling. The polls were distributed across public social networking groups frequented by independent travelers.

- **Poll 1 asked:** "How do online reviews primarily affect your choice of accommodation?" The user interface recorded 142 unique participants. The cumulative count across all answer selections totaled 194, indicating that the system allowed multiple-choice selections.
- **Poll 2 asked:** "Which platform do you trust the most when reading hotel reviews before booking?" This poll recorded 165 unique participants, with a total selection count of 218 due to overlapping multi-response features.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data was extracted directly from the system summaries and processed using basic descriptive statistics. The selection counts and percentages were reproduced exactly as displayed in the original poll interfaces. We intentionally avoided recalculating the percentages using a single denominator, as keeping the original overlapping metrics provides a more accurate representation of multi-platform user habits. The highest-frequency responses were identified as core trends and interpreted alongside themes from the tourism literature. No advanced inferential modeling or causal statistical tests were performed.

2.4. Methodological and Ethical Limitations

Several built-in limitations must be noted. Because the online polling tools prioritized user anonymity, mandatory demographic screening (such as exact age verification or geographic location tracking) was not implemented. Consequently, while the polls were shared in spaces populated by young adults, we cannot mathematically guarantee that every single participant belongs strictly to the Millennial generation. The analysis therefore refers to "respondents" or "participants" rather than making broad population-level generalizations.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Review Elements and Perceived Influence

The data from the first poll demonstrates a powerful negativity bias among travelers. Out of 142 unique voters, the most frequent choice was the statement regarding recent negative reviews, capturing 91 individual selections (64% as displayed). The quantitative breakdown of how different feedback elements influence choices is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of review-influence factors (142 participants).

Response Option	Selections	Percentage Shown in Poll
Recent negative reviews make me look for another hotel	91	64%
Overall star rating (e.g., 4.5/5) is my first filter	45	32%
Guest-uploaded photos are more important than text	28	20%
Management responses to complaints change my perspective	19	13%
Online reviews do not really change my final decision	11	8%

Note: Total selections equal 194 due to the multiple-response poll format.

The data indicates that a high aggregate score (like a 4.5 out of 5) serves merely as an initial filter. The actual final decision is heavily dictated by the absence of recent text-based complaints.

3.2. Platform Trust and Preferences

The second poll revealed a massive concentration of consumer trust toward transaction-verified platforms. Booking.com emerged as the dominant channel, receiving 112 selections (68%) from the 165 participants. The complete distribution of trusted platforms is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Trusted review platforms according to respondents (165 participants).

Platform Option	Selections	Percentage Shown in Poll
Booking.com (Verified guest reviews)	112	68%
TripAdvisor (Open community forum)	36	22%
Google Maps/Google Reviews	31	19%
Airbnb (Host and guest reviews)	24	15%
Instagram / TikTok travel blogs	13	8%
Official hotel brand websites	2	1%

Note: Total selections equal 218 due to overlapping multi-platform usage.

The fact that official hotel websites received only 1% of the votes underscores a near-total collapse of consumer trust in one-sided corporate marketing messages.

4. DISCUSSION

The empirical findings gathered from the polls strongly support the risk-reduction theories established in previous tourism literature (Mitra et al., 1999). Because independent travel involves paying significant financial costs before experiencing the actual service, consumers look to the digital community as a protective buffer. The high frequency of the "negative review" selection (64%) proves that travelers actively scan for worst-case scenarios. They read recent complaints to evaluate whether a hotel's flaws are manageable or completely unacceptable.

The shift toward Booking.com (68%) and away from open platforms like TripAdvisor (22%) reveals a sophisticated evolution in user habits. Early eWOM literature treated all online comments equally. However, modern young adults are highly aware of the existence of fake, bought, or sponsored reviews (Mayzlin et al., 2014). By choosing platforms that require a confirmed financial transaction before a review can be posted, consumers are actively outsourcing their quality-control and verification needs to the platform's infrastructure.

4.1. Generational Context: Millennials vs. Baby Boomers

Placing these results within a wider generational framework highlights major structural differences in consumer trust. Millennials function completely within a decentralized peer-to-peer trust paradigm. They validate reality by looking horizontally at the unfiltered experiences of regular people. In contrast, secondary literature shows that older cohorts, such as Baby Boomers, rely more heavily on vertical institutional trust (Glover & Prideaux, 2009). This includes official government star certifications, professional travel agents, or mainstream travel media brands. A Baby Boomer may view an official "4-Star" rating plaque as a definitive guarantee of quality. A Millennial, however, will cross-reference that physical plaque against real-time user ratings on their smartphone, prioritizing the crowd over the institution. Because our

data lacks age-disaggregation, these comparisons remain conceptual and serve as an important path for future empirical tracking.

4.2. Practical Implications for Industry

For hospitality managers, these data patterns indicate that traditional marketing budgets should be reallocated. Investing heavily in glossy, professional photography for an official website yields low returns if the property's crowdsourced rating is poor. Instead, hotels must adopt a highly proactive review-management strategy. Since recent negative feedback is the number one driver of customer defection, management must monitor review channels constantly, responding to complaints transparently and fixing operational issues in real time.

4.3. Research Limitations

The main limitations of this study include the non-probability sampling method and the lack of precise demographic filters during the online polling phase. Furthermore, the data records self-reported perceptions rather than real-world credit card transactions. These elements mean the study is exploratory and its results should be interpreted strictly within the context of the surveyed group.

5. CONCLUSION

This study applied the structural IMRAD framework to explore how online reviews and rating ecosystems shape the hotel choices of independent young travelers. The quantitative data indicates that avoiding negative experiences is the primary catalyst in the choice pipeline, with 64% of respondents actively filtering out hotels with recent complaints. Additionally, consumer trust has migrated decisively toward transaction-verified platforms like Booking.com (68%), leaving traditional travel blogs and official brand sites mostly obsolete. These insights show that modern hospitality marketing is no longer about corporate broadcasting; it is about managing live peer-to-peer feedback. Future research should utilize stratified sampling methods to isolate age-specific data, allowing a mathematically verified comparison between multiple generational cohorts.

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