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Impact of Online Reviews in Online Booking – Case Study Capital City of Kosovo

Fitore Jashari¹, Visar Rrustemi²

Abstract: The easy access in information, due to Internet usage, is leading to more informed and wiser consumers around the world, affecting the way they search for information, and decide to buy something. This seems to be true even for developing countries, like Kosovo. This paper's objective is to show if consumers of capital city of Kosovo use online reviews, and if this usage impacts their online booking habits. The research data were collected using a survey from a stratified sample (150 consumers), consisting of two groups of respondents. Respondents were divided into these two groups based on their habit, whether they read or not online reviews before booking online. The aim was to find out if there is any relation between reading online reviews and consumers' practice of booking travels online. A significant relation was found between the practice of reading online reviews and the amount of travels booked online. Also, a significant relation was found between the age of consumers and their practice of booking online. The implications of these findings suggest businesses to allow online reviews on their websites and social media accounts, as they result to be a great tool on driving their businesses' growth.

Keywords: Information search; digital sources, online booking, reviews, consumers

JEL Classification: L96

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1. Introduction

As the technology is developing and advancing, consumers are having more access in different information sources, except those provided by businesses. One of these sources is online reviews. Studies and practice show that reading online reviews impacts consumers' buying decision making process. They are considered to impact the amount of online booking. In this paper, we will refer to online reviews as ratings and written feedback of people who used any particular product or service. While, online booking will refer to online reservations of any travel package.

To post or read an online review, Internet access is absolutely needed. Regarding our case study the capital city of Kosovo, the Internet penetration and usage is estimated to be very high. According to Kosovo's Agency of Statistics report, in year 2017, 88.8% of Kosovo's households had Internet access. (KAS, 2017) Kosovo's population is also estimated to have a high rate of social media usage. (KAICT, 2013) But we do not have any official report that informs us regarding the online reviews' usage among Kosovo's population. Considering this, the main purpose of this paper is to provide missing information regarding the impact of reading online reviews, with a specific focus on online booking of travels. To

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accomplish our research purpose, we needed to answer on two research questions:

Q1: Is there any difference in the amount of travels booked online, between people that read online reviews, and those that do not read them?

Q2: Is there any correlation between the age of people that book travels online, and the amount of travels they book?

To answer these research questions, two hypotheses were raised:

H1: There is significant difference in the average times of travels booked online, between the respondents that read online reviews, and those that do not read online reviews.

H2: There is significant correlation between age of participants and the times they have booked travels online within the last year.

The statistical analyses of data and the results of the paper will provide proofs to accept or reject these two hypotheses. The research findings aim to contribute in the area of digital information sources' impact on consumers' buying decision making process. Despite the benefits and contribution, this research has some limitations or shortcomings. The biggest limitation is considered the small size of the sample, as it will not be enough to represent the whole population of the capital city of Kosovo. Also, the narrow focus only on online booking, without including other types of online purchases, is considered to be a limitation. In any case, the findings from the survey are indicative to undertake future similar researches, and validate them through larger surveys and research areas.

2. Literature Review

Today, in time of Internet penetration and usage, consumers are faced with an enormous amount of information. This is making consumers to search for more reliable information, before buying something, in order to reduce the insecurities and to be sure they are making the right decisions. As the offline Word of Mouth (WOM) is considered to have a great impact on buying decision process (Kotler et al., 2006), the online WOM is having a greater impact, as long as it is more voluminous in quantity, and it is more easily accessed. (Gretzel, 2006) Among the most commonly used sources for online WOM, are considered online reviews. (Chatterjee, 2001) An author states that when individuals are looking to purchase a product, they will likely turn to the Internet and read the reviews from their peers before they buy. (Weinberg, 2009) Reading online reviews enables them to get information from real previous users of something they are interested in. A very important source of reading online reviews is social media, which refers to activities, practices, and behavior among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media - Web based applications. (Safko, 2012) Social media activities enable evaluation of brand value by making it possible to exchange ideas and information among people online. (Kim et al., 2012)

According to an author, there are some types of social media. Rating and reviews pages are websites used by businesses to understand the role of consumer, and treat them as influencers, in order to manage and understand better the conversations in digital environment. (Zarrella, 2010) Today, businesses are inviting consumers to be an active part of their messages' creation process, generating ideas from them, in order to

create and launch new products. A message and a product created in that form, is called *Consumer Generated Content*. (Safko, 2012) Other words used to describe it, are *Community Engagement* and *Co-creation*, which are considered as very important parts of marketing strategies. (Gordon, 2011) This is also described by Psychological Engagement, which means that the consumers are no longer passive recipients of information, but indeed they are participants. (Schmitt, 2012) Participation may be passive involving simply consuming the social media content, or active including such behaviors as submitting consumer-generated content. (Fosdick, 2012)

Online reviews are also considered as an applicable technique for social CRM that helps businesses to get more accurate feedback from their consumers. (Evans et al., 2010) Using online reviews, businesses can understand better what their consumers like or dislike about their products or services. They serve as a tool to give consumers a voice. (Weinberg, 2009) Online reviews are considered as one of the most important aspect of physical evidence for businesses in the digital environment. (Chaffey et al., 2008) According to a study, 10 out of 28 brands included in the study, gave consumers the opportunity to vote or provide feedback about the content of others. (Ashley et al., 2015) As consumers read more and more reviews, one of the most successful strategies for managing information searching process, and consumers' feedback, is giving them the opportunity to post their reviews. (Scott, 2007)

Consumer socialization theory predicts that communication among consumers affects their attitudes in three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. (Ward, 1974) An area in which online reviews are also used is the evaluation of alternatives by consumers, especially for variety seeking. (Solomon et al., 2006) Online reviews are used for two main reasons: to provide information and as recommendations. (Park et al., 2007) This means that, if consumers are about to switch brands, they tend to read online reviews, in order to make sure if they are making the right decision. Today, almost everyone, searches online for product reviews, and gets more detailed, exact and reliable information (Smith et al., 2005), because that information is from people who have already used that product/service.

Reviews pages, can also be considered as digital reference groups that create the so called *Crowd Effect*, meaning that people observe others' behavior, and tend to practice it. This is known as the *Wisdom of Crowds*, where the group is considered wiser than the individuals. (Surowiecki, 2005) Online reviews are sometimes posted by experts of a particular field that are the first ones to buy the product, called *the Market Mavens*. (Solomon et al., 2006) If these group leaders are convinced by companies to buy their products, then it is thought that the other members of the group will echo their behavior. (Lee et al., 2012)

The author Lon Safko, presents the Consumer life cycle on digital environment and social media (Safko, 2012), which shows that consumers pass through some steps during the integration and involvement in social media. The stages are as follows: *Lurkers* - Observe the community, view content, but don't add to the community comments. *Novices* - Begin to engage to the community, while posting few comments. *Insiders* - Consistently add to the community discussion, and interact with other members. *Leaders* - known as veteran participants, tend to correct others' behavior. *Elders* - leave the network for a variety of reasons. On this life cycle of digital consumers, online reviews are very important for each group of consumers, especially for lurkers, insiders and leaders. Lurkers read others' online reviews, and tend to change their consumer behavior. Insiders write reviews and rate particular products or services, expressing their post purchase satisfaction. And, leaders tend to correct others' behavior, by posting "reviews of reviews", a very common practice in nowadays.

We can find another classification of consumers in digital environment, in the study of 236 participants, regarding the social media activities and engagement. (Vinerean et al., 2013) According to this study, the group of consumers named *Engagers* included 32% of the total research sample, and it consisted of members that were described as people who read reviews, post reviews, and rate sites, products and services. They showed a greater trust in information from friends, family and other users in online environment. (Vinerean et al., 2013)

Another study, which included 338 social media users, concluded that reading and posting product reviews was among the mostly used activity in online environment. (Erdogmus et al., 2012)

3. Research Methodology

For this research paper, we collected primary and secondary data. Secondary data is presented as a literature review that was studied to get a better understanding on new digital sources of information. While, primary data of the paper was collected directly from participants of the research.

The main purpose of this research is to find the impact of online reviews on online booking of travels. In order to accomplish the research purpose, participants were chosen by a stratified sampling method that consisted of two different groups (strata or clusters). Participants were divided on these two groups based on their habit, whether they read online reviews to search for information before booking travels online, or not. While, within the groups or strata, participants were chosen randomly. The sample consisted of 150 participants, 75 included in the first group, and 75 in the second one.

Data was collected through an electronic survey questionnaire (www.esurveycreeator.com) that was sent to all the members of the sample. The responding rate was 100% (all of them participated). The participants were residents of Prishtina, capital city of Kosovo. The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions, including different types of them. After the 8th question, participants were asked to stop answering other questions, if they do not practice reading online reviews before booking travels online. The questionnaire was tested for clarity in advance, and it is attached to the Appendix section of this paper.

The collected data provide information about the sample description, Internet and online reviews' usage, reasons for reading online reviews, the mostly used sources of reading them, etc. In order to get the results, two hypotheses were raised. The hypotheses were tested through a statistical analyze, using the SPSS package, through statistical Z test, and linear regression analysis.

The results are interpreted and presented by charts, tables, and verbal descriptions.

4. Analyses and Results

Sample description

Our sample consisted of 150 participants, all citizens of capital city of Kosovo, Prishtina. The participants were aged from less than 20 years old, to more than 40 years old. As shown in the table below (Table 1), the group with the highest percentage frequency was the one of respondents aged 20-40 years old.

Table 1. Age of respondents

Age	Frequency	Relative frequency	Percentage frequency	Cumulative percentage frequency
0-20 years old	45	0.30	30.00%	30.00%
20-40 years old	70	0.47	46.67%	77%
over 40 years old	35	0.23	23.33%	100%
Total	150	1	100.00%	

Source: Author contribution

The sample included both male and female participants, with slightly more females, with a 58.67 percentage of the total sample (Table 2). From 150 participants, 117 of them were employed (78%).

Table 2. Gender of respondents

Gender	Frequency	Relative frequency	Percentage frequency	Cumulative percentage frequency
Male	62	0.41	41.33%	41.33%
Female	88	0.59	58.67%	100%
Total	150	1	100.00%	

Source: Author contribution

All of the participants (100%), declared to have Internet access on their mobile phones or any other personal wireless device. The vast majority of them, 90 participants (60%), declared to spend one to three hours per day using Internet (Fig. 1). This shows the large Internet penetration and usage of participants.

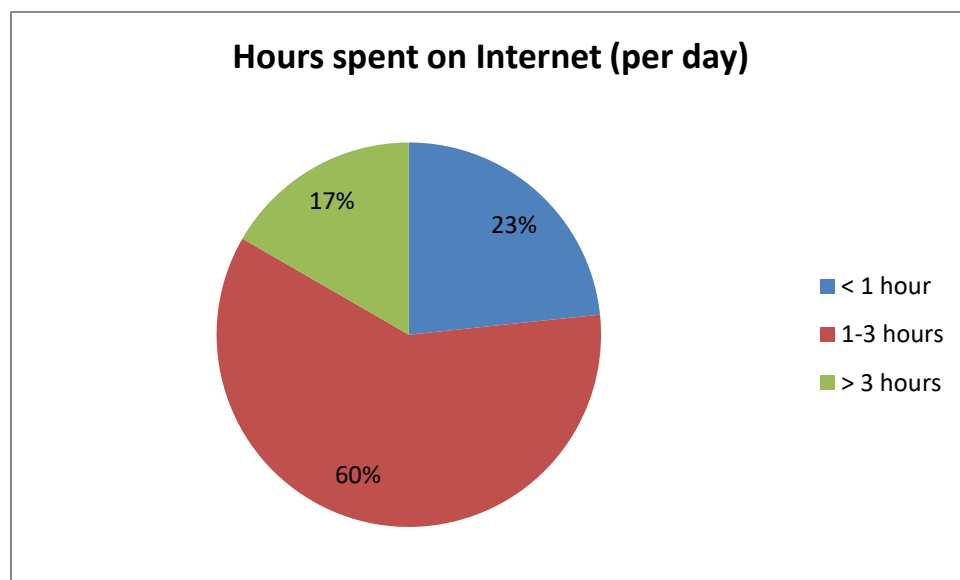


Figure 1. Hours spent on social media (per day)

Source: Author contribution

As searching for information before buying is very important, we asked our respondents to tell us about their opinion regarding the reliability of some information sources. 73 of them (48.66%) responded that

they consider online reviews as more reliable information sources (Fig. 2).

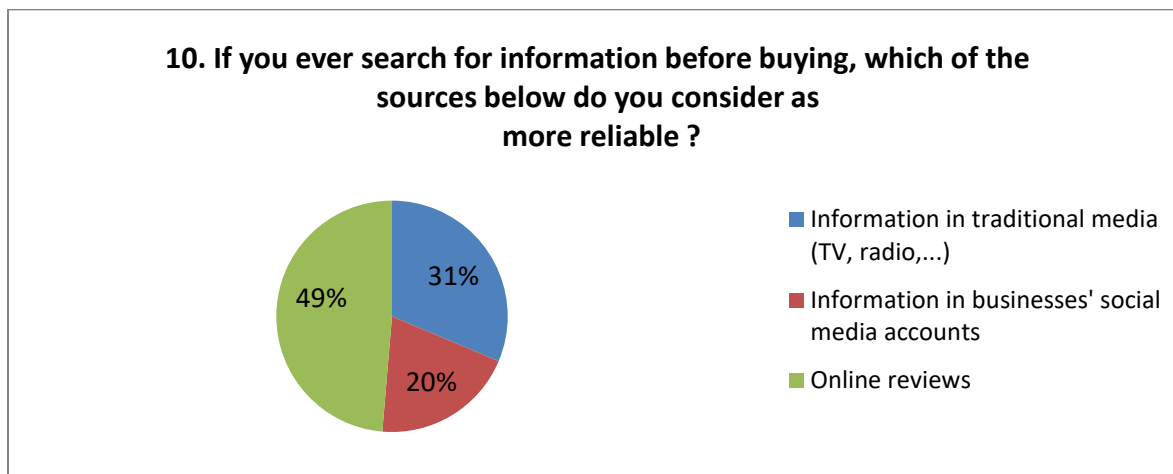


Figure 2. Reliability of sources used for searching information before buying

Source: Author contribution

For our research purpose, we needed data regarding online booking of travels. As long as respondents claimed to be Internet users, we assumed that they would have booked online any travel journey, at least once in their lifetime. In compliance with our assumption, all of the respondents claimed to have booked travels online, at least once within the last year. To be more accurate, we needed to know how many travels have they booked online within the last year. The answers were from 1 to 6 travels for the last year, with an average of 2.12 times (travels) per participant. For the purpose of comparison, we surveyed two groups of people that booked travels online. The first group included participants that read online reviews before deciding to book online, and the second group included participants that do not read online reviews before booking online. Further, we will present the research results, for participants that read online reviews before booking.

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Statistical analyses for respondents that read online reviews before booking

From the research results, we found that most of respondents that read online reviews, read them when they are interested on new alternatives (travel packages), with 42 of 75 participants (56%) responding so. (Fig. 3)

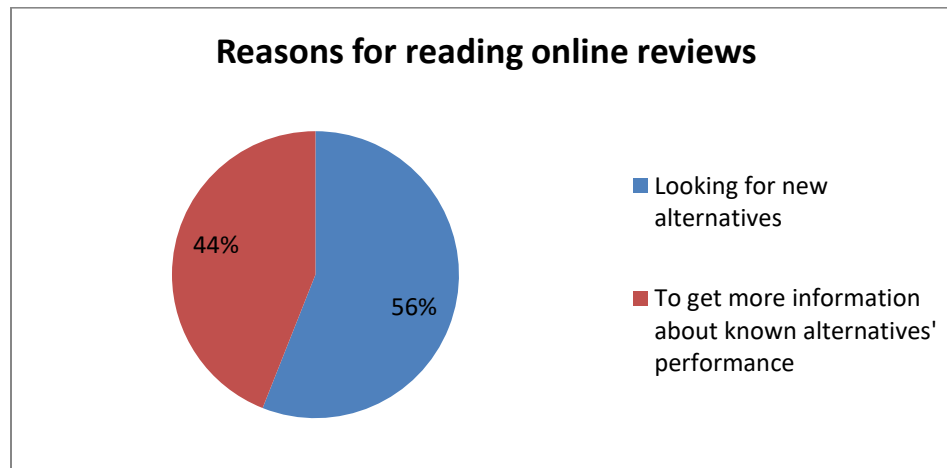


Figure 3. Reasons for reading online reviews before booking online

Source: Author contribution

The research results show that, review sites of travel agencies are the mostly used sources for reading online reviews before booking travels online. This is a respond given by 45 respondents (60% of 75 respondents who read online reviews). Review sites are followed by social media, as 45.33% of respondents ranked it as the mostly used source. The least used sources are the experts' sources, like official and statistics reports. (Table 3)

Table 3. Mostly used sources for reading reviews before online booking

	0		1		2		3		4		5	
	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%
Expert sources (Official reports)	50	66.67%	9	12.00%	5	6.67%	1	1.33%	4	5.33%	6	8.00%
Other	32	42.67%	7	9.33%	1	1.33%	23	30.67%	2	2.67%	10	13.33%
Social media	2	2.67%	2	2.66%	9	12.00%	3	4.00%	25	33.33%	34	45.33%
Traveling agencies' review sites	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	11	14.66%	19	25.33%	45	60%

Source: Author contribution

In Figure 4, we presented the ranking of some factors, based on their importance for respondents when they read online reviews. The most important factor, turned out to be *time that has passed since the review was posted or rated*, with an average of answers equal to 4.08 (from 0-5). This means that, the older the review, the less it affects the readers' behavior. *The number of available online reviews* is also considered of a large importance, with an average answer of 3.66%. This means that, the more online reviews, the more, respondents are encouraged to read reviews.

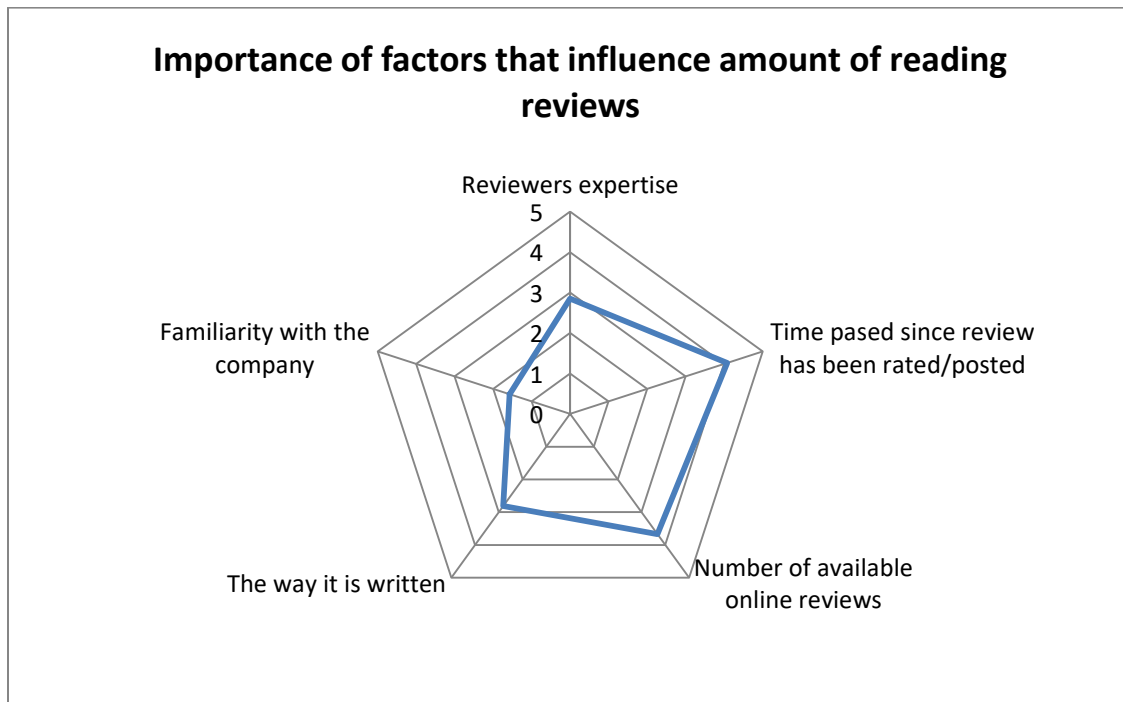


Figure 4. Factors ranked based on their importance when reading online reviews

Source: Author contribution

Testing of first hypotheses

The reason we collected data from two different groups of respondents, was to see if there is any significant difference in the amount of travels booked online within the last year, between the respondents that read online reviews, and those that do not read online reviews before booking. To get to the results, first of all, we raised the null and the alternative hypothesis, as follows:

H_0 : There is no significant difference in the average times of travels booked online, between the respondents that read online reviews, and those that do not read online reviews.

H_1 : There is significant difference in the average times of travels booked online, between the respondents that read online reviews, and those that do not read online reviews.

Or, statistically it is presented as:

$H_0: \bar{x}_1 = \bar{x}_2$ $H_1: \bar{x}_1 \neq \bar{x}_2$

To test the hypothesis, we used the Z statistical test for two means. (Gujarati, 2004) The alpha level, or the error rate we were willing to work with, was 5%.

Table.4. Differences between readers and non-readers of online reviews, and their online bookings

	Mean	Variance	Observations	Hypothesized Mean Difference	Z value	Z Critical two-tail	P value (two-tail)	Significance level
<i>Reading online reviews</i>	2.72	1.09	75	0	8.63	1.960	0	0.05
<i>Not reading online reviews</i>	1.52	0.36	75					

Source: Author contribution

As we can see from the Table 4, there were 75 participants for each group. From the statistical indicators, we can see that there are different means and variances for two groups. This indicates that the group of participants that read online reviews, on average book more online, than those that do not read online reviews. But, to have statistically accurate answers, we analyzed other statistical indicators, as well.

After the calculations we got the Z value that is equal to 8.63, and the P value, that is equal to 0.00. As long as the Z value was larger than the Z critical value, $8.63 > 1.96$, and the P value was smaller than the alpha level of significance, $0 < 0.05$, we rejected the null hypothesis, and accepted the alternative hypothesis. So, we can say that: *With a 95% level of confidence, there is statistically significant difference between the average times of travels booked online by those that read and those that do not read online reviews.*

Testing of second hypotheses

From the research results, we saw that there seemed to have a correlation between times of booking online, and the age of participants. To prove this, we raised another null and alternative hypothesis, as follows:

H_0 : There is no significant correlation between age of participants and the times they have booked travels online, within the last year.

H_1 : There is significant correlation between age of participants and the times they have booked travels online, within the last year.

Or, statistically it is presented as:

$H_0: R^2 = 0$ $H_1: R^2 \neq 0$

To test the hypothesis, we used the Pearson correlation coefficient, R^2 . (Gujarati, 2004) We analyzed data for the age of the 75 participants that claimed to read online reviews before booking travels online, and the times that they booked online in the last year. After the calculation we got the value of R^2 coefficient that is - 0.82. As the value is near -1, this means that there is a strongly negative relation between two variables (Gujarati, 2004), age and times of booking travels online. So, as participants grow older, they tend to book less travels online. This is shown in the Figure 5, with data presented in a chart, where times of travels booked online in the last year are presented in the Y axes (as dependent variable), and the age of participants is presented in the X axes (as independent variable). In the chart below, we presented this through the linear regression line and equation.

The coefficient of age, as an independent variable, in the regression equation, means that, if the age of a participant decreases with 0.08 years, the times of booking travels online increases on average by one time of online booking per year.

As long as the R^2 was smaller than 0, so $-0,82 < 0$, we rejected the null hypothesis, and accepted the alternative one. So, from the results we can say that: *There is significant negative correlation between age of participants, and the times they have booked travels online within the last year.*

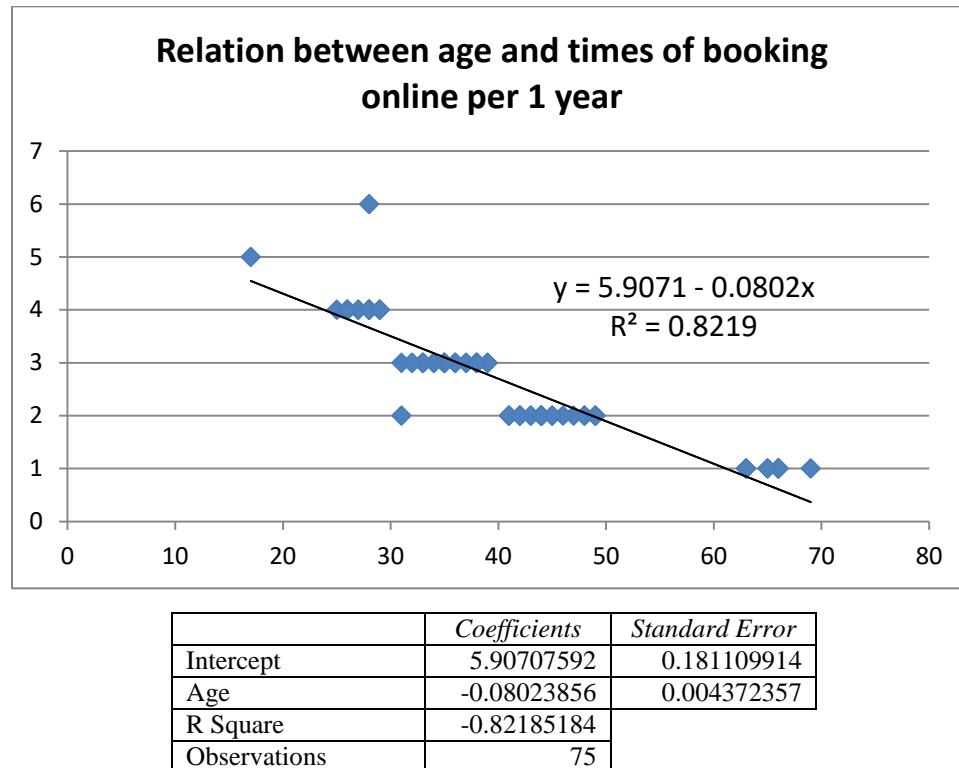


Figure 5. Regression line of respondents' age and times of booking online (per year)

Source: Author contribution

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the research results, we can conclude that respondents of capital city of Kosovo use Internet as an information searching tool. This conclusion is drawn from the data results that show a large Internet access (hundred percent of sample). Results also show that the vast majority of the respondents spend, up to three hours a day in Internet. Younger respondents seem to search more for information in Internet, including online reviews. They seem to consider reviews as an important tool, as the largest percent of respondents answered that they consider online reviews as a more reliable source of information compared to other electronic information sources. This large Internet penetration and usage, would certainly lead to a high degree of online purchasing. For the research purpose, we focused on online booking of travels. We found out that within the last year, our respondents (150 of them) booked on to six travels online, with an average of 2.12 times (travels) per respondent. 75 of them (half of the sample)

claimed to read online reviews before deciding to book travels online. While the other half, claimed to never have read online reviews before booking online. One of the objectives of this research paper was to find if there was any difference between those who read online reviews and those who do not read them, expressed by the amount of travels that they booked online. From the data analyses, we concluded that there was significance difference between those two groups, in regards of the times they booked travels online within the last year. The results show that those who read online reviews before booking online, in the last year booked more travels online, meaning that they were influenced in any particular way, by the online reviews they read. There was also found a significant correlation between times of online booking in the last year, and the age of respondents. The results show that the younger the respondent, the larger the amount (times) of travels booked online. This can be explained by the fact that the vast majority of the sample, was young aged. This is a founding based only on the practices within the last year, and considering the large Internet penetration in Kosovo, it leaves us to believe that in a near future the age of Kosovar's will no longer be related to the amount of travels booked online, as people are tending to use online reviews more, no matter the age.

Research findings show that the main reason why people read online reviews is to find new places to go or visit. This means that online reviews, are used more to search for more information, and they are slightly less used to evaluate alternatives. The mostly used sources for reading online reviews resulted to be websites of traveling agencies. This is a very important finding for businesses, as it shows them the great importance of allowing consumers to publicly rate their satisfaction with businesses' products or services. This would be a strong recommendation for the businesses of capital city of Kosovo. Respondents declared that when they read online reviews, the most important thing for them is the time that has passed since the review was rated or posted. This means that the review will affect the consumers more, if it has been posted more recently. This also leads us to the same recommendation for businesses that they should allow consumers to rate their satisfaction any time they want.

Referred to the research limitations mentioned in the beginning of this paper, we can recommend that there is free room for further research related to the impact of online reviews on online booking in capital city of Kosovo. This research can be further expanded, by analyzing a larger sample that would show a better overview of population of Kosovo's capital city. It can also be expanded to other areas of online purchasing, as long as this research is specifically focused in online booking of travels.

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7. Appendix – Questionnaire

Impact of online reviews in booking online

This questionnaire is designed to estimate the impact of reading online reviews in the amount of online booking within last year. We assure you that your responses will remain safe, anonymous, and will only be used for research purpose. Thank you very much for your participation.

How old are you?

Age: years old

Gender?

- ☐ Male
☐ Female

Current status?

- ☐ Employed
☐ Unemployed

Do you have Internet access on your personal mobile phone or any other personal wireless device?

- ☐ yes
☐ no

How much time do you spend using Internet (per day)?

- ☐ Up to 1 hour a day
☐ 1 - 3 hours a day
☐ More than 3 hours a day

If you search for information before buying, which of the sources listed below do you consider as more reliable?

- ☐ Information in traditional media (Tv, radio,...)
☐ Information in businesses' social media accounts
☐ Online reviews

Within the last year, how many travels have you booked online?

times.

Do you consider reading online reviews before booking travels online?

If no, please stop your survey here. Thank you for your participation.

☐ yes

☐ no

Why do you usually read online reviews before booking travels online?

☐ Looking for new alternatives

☐ To get more information regarding known alternatives' performance

Which of the following sources, do you use more for reading online reviews before booking travels online?

0 - Never use. 5 - Use mostly.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	--	-	+	++
Expert sources (Official reports)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Traveling agencies' review sites	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social media	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please rank the following factors, based on the importance they have when you read online reviews before booking travels online?

1 - Not important at all. 5 - Most important.

⬆ Reviewers' expertise

⬆ Time passed since review has been posted (rated)

⬆ Number of available online reviews

⬆ The way it is written

⬆ Familiarity with the company