

## DECONSTRUCTING PERSUASIVENESS OF ONLINE HOTEL REVIEW PLATFORMS

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Considering the significant influence of online hotel reviews on both tourism demand and supply side, these may be considered as a successful persuasive tool. Accordingly, it is necessary to investigate the broader context in which reviews are generated and what are the components that contribute to their effectiveness. The main goal of this study was to analyze the communication occurring on hotel review platforms from a social psychological perspective through understanding structure, characteristics, and functions of attitudes expressed in guests' reviews. In addition, it aims to identify how persuasive cues in review responses should be defined. Following this aim, the authors applied multiple case study design and collected data in several stages through document analysis, participant observation, netnography, and interviews with different stakeholders involved in online review management process. Results of the qualitative content analysis showed that, in order to use the full persuasive potential of review platforms, it is necessary for hotel management to define its presence and visibility on these platforms, to conduct in-depth analysis of structure, characteristics, and functions of attitudes expressed in reviews, and to establish a systematic approach towards use of central and peripheral cues in review responses to induce desired cognitive processing of these messages.

**Key words:** Online hotel reviews; Persuasive communication; Attitude change; Elaboration likelihood model; Qualitative content analysis

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### Introduction

Development and influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on the tourism industry are considered as one of the most popular research areas in the field (Buhalis & Law, 2008). With the introduction of Web 2.0 and social media, significant changes were brought to the

industry and investigated from both customers' and suppliers' perspectives (Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). When it comes to research on user-generated-content (UGC), online reviews are considered as one of the most popular and most important travel content on social media (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007). An online hotel review platform provides the context and opportunity for

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its users to communicate their experiences with a certain hotel, which can affect the reader's perception of this property and thus implies the existence of the platform's persuasive potential. In order to address the issue of persuasiveness, knowledge from social psychological field can be beneficial. Conducting study in this manner is in accordance with the increased interest in interdisciplinary and postdisciplinary tourism research (Coles, Hall, & Duval, 2006; Darbellay, 2016; Darbellay & Stock, 2012). In these studies, mediation aspect, where knowledge production is based on mutual interaction between different disciplines, was emphasized. In the current study, the authors tried to combine knowledge from computer science and ICT studies about characteristics of specific online platforms together with social psychological perspective regarding persuasive communication and attitudes in order to better understand their potential in a tourism-and hospitality-related context. For data analysis, researchers used qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which is well explained and often used in nursing studies.

By combining knowledge from different areas, the main goal of this study was to analyze the communication occurring in online hotel review platforms from a social psychological perspective by understanding structure, characteristics, and functions of the attitudes expressed in guests' reviews. In addition, it aims to identify how persuasive messages should be defined by the hotel representatives responsible of answering these reviews. According to these aims, the following research questions were derived:

1. What are the characteristics of communication in online hotel review platforms?
2. Which attitude components are present in both positive and negative online reviews posted on hotel review platforms and how are these expressed?
3. What are the characteristics and functions of these attitudes?
4. Which of the potential central or peripheral cues may be found in hotel management responses to hotel reviews?

By finding answers to these questions, authors will try to draw the contours of persuasive com-

munication framework occurring on online recommendation platforms, which will allow a better view on structure, functions, and characteristics of attitudes towards five-star resort hotels and potential persuasive cues in review responses. What will be innovative in this study is the social psychological perspective used in attempts to provide better understanding of the communication occurring in review platforms and, potentially, provide a rational explanation for their success and effectiveness.

### Literature Review

Technology is regarded as one of the factors with major impact on tourism consumer behavior, especially in information search, purchase, and sharing opinion and experiences (Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2014). By promoting globalization of the industry, ICT development empowered customers to search, customize, and buy tourism products on their own, reducing risk and uncertainty while significantly affecting quality of the trip (Fodness & Murray, 1997). On the other hand, by creating new communication patterns in the online environment, they became effective tools for suppliers and other stakeholders in tourism business in creating, managing, and selling their products and services (Buhalis & Law, 2008). With the development of Web 2.0, diverse UGC spread all over the Internet through various social media channels, increasing interaction among participants (Murugesan, 2010). In the tourism literature, studies were conducted on how people engage with UGC (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), needs that people satisfy by participating in online travel communities (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004), but also how people can use some social media channels, such as Facebook, to improve the tourism experience during on-site phase (Kim, Fesenmaier, & Johnson, 2013). In addition, social media and UGC are considered as mediators of travel experience influencing increase in destination awareness and destination choice decisions (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009).

From the suppliers' perspective, social media can be used to increase search engine optimization efforts (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), to provide insight into consumers' preferences and behavioral patterns (Noone, McGuire, & Rohlf, 2011), to enhance online reputation through raising trustworthiness

and customers' commitment to the property (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom, 2015; Sparks & Browning, 2011), as well as promotional and marketing channel (Huang, 2012; Hvass & Munar, 2012). As for destination management organizations, social media can be used to define specific promotional strategy (Munar, 2012), shape destination brand (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015), and raise brand awareness (De Moya & Jain, 2013; Tse & Zhang, 2013).

#### *Online Reviews in Tourism Literature*

Creating and consuming travel reviews is considered as one of the most popular UGC activities (Gretzel et al., 2007), causing significant changes in how travelers search for information and make reservations. Considering the importance and qualitative contribution of online guest reviews, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) proposed an integrative approach of incorporating these in the hotel classifications systems (WTO, 2014). Online reviews are defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former consumers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via Internet" (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). These reviews are considered as the most accessible and prevalent form of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (De Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2013), which is also perceived as reliable and trustable as reviewers tend to express themselves in a good, believable, and "not-to-blame" manner (Sparks & Browning, 2010). Online reviews provide travelers with more information and recommendation on choosing holiday destinations and accommodations (Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Sparks & Browning, 2011) while reducing travelers' perceptions of risk during the reservation process (Gretzel et al., 2007).

From related tourism literature, it can be concluded that a mere presence of online reviews can increase awareness of a certain hotel (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009), but also help in identifying the attributes leading to repeated visiting intentions and reference for a certain hotel (Ong, 2012; Zhang & Mao, 2012). Positive or negative evaluations in the review, or valence, may affect customers' assessment of service quality (Sparks & Browning,

2011). In addition, storytelling pattern of negative reviews has the potential to catch the reader's attention, as he/she gets drawn into the story and is able to understand the whole context that brought to the complaint in the first place (Spark & Browning, 2010).

Hotel guests' reviews and responses to these were examined in terms of online reputation (Baka, 2016; Levy, Duan, & Boo, 2013), since it was proven their significant impact on product sales (Ye, Gu, Chen, & Law, 2008). Considering the importance of managerial response to reviews, Zhang and Vasquez (2014) derived a typical sequence of moves that occur in many responses to negative reviews, such as opening pleasantries, gratitude, apologize for source of trouble, proof of action, invitation for second visit, and closing pleasantries.

As can be concluded based on the reviewed literature, online reviews have significant impact on the potential readers. In order to better understand the reasons for such effectiveness of reviews and managerial responses, the authors considered it useful to use social psychological theoretical implications on persuasive communication, attitudes, and persuasive cues.

#### *Persuasion, Attitudes, and Persuasive Cues*

Every activity or procedure that has the potential to change someone's mind may be regarded as persuasion (Baumeister & Finkel, 2010). Persuasion is also seen as the science and practice of altering someone's choices, while ambivalence represents the core proposition for it (Knowles & Linn, 2004). According to Perloff (2010), persuasion is a "symbolic process in which communicators try to convince people to change their attitudes or behaviors regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere of free choice" (p. 12).

Considering the effects of online reviews on tourist behavior, it is understandable why online reviews are considered as a potential persuasive tool. Attitude expressions or "psychological tendencies expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1) in online reviews, based on personal experience, have the potential and power to persuade both future customers and hotel management. Attitude researchers emphasize the importance of understanding attitude

structure, which according to Breckler (1984) can be cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally based, as well as their characteristics and function in social life (Baumaister & Finkel, 2010). In terms of their characteristics, attitudes can be classified into explicit and implicit (Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000), general and specific (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977), accessible or strong (Hogg & Vaughan, 2010), as well as ambivalent ones or those that occur when people evaluate one attitude object, both positively and negatively (Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). Special emphasis was placed on strong attitudes, which were further explained as: relevant—being of great importance for the person who holds them; involve ego—linked to the individual's core values; extreme—far from neutral, at the ends of the strength continuum; certain—one definitely believes that the attitude he/she holds is correct; accessible—it comes quickly almost automatically to one's mind; knowledgeable—person possesses a great amount of information about the topic; and hierarchically organized—attitude is internally consistent and embedded in elaboration structure (Perloff, 2010).

The term attitude function may denote specifically the needs served by expressing or possessing attitude as well as different psychological motivations (Kruglanski & Higgins, 2007). Recent social psychological sources combine the research findings of different authors (Kruglanski & Higgins, 2007; Perloff, 2010) and suggest a list of possible functions attitude may have, such as: knowledge and reasoning facilitator, behavior energizers, utilitarian, value-expressive, social identity, social-adjustive, and ego-defensive function.

Research in persuasion addresses the formation and change of attitudes as a result of information processing, often in response to message about attitude object (Tesser & Schwarz, 2001). Therefore, it is of great importance to understand the basics of the communication that may be able to address these attitudes. One of the most significant theoretical frameworks on persuasive communication, Yale approach, was introduced by Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) after a series of studies on Second World War's propaganda and it defined factors, processes, and outcomes of this type of communication. The biggest strength of persuasive communication lies in its power to stimulate cognitive thinking among audience and induce attitude change.

According to Hovland et al. (1953) there are three factors of persuasive communication that affect attitude change: 1) *source* of the communication or communicator, with characteristics such as authority, credibility, and social attractiveness; 2) *message*, which is relevant, two sided, not designed to influence, and induces positive emotions; and 3) *audience* with differences in demographics, self-esteem level, distraction, etc. (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, & Sommers, 2013; Kruglanski & Higgins, 2007; Perloff, 2010).

An individual's cognitive activities will significantly influence how he/she receives and reacts to persuasive messages. Therefore, the main goal of successful persuasion is to use the most appropriate tactics to induce cognitive processing that will lead to positive reactions towards the desired attitude object. Throughout the years, the effect of each persuasive communication factor was tested, with results that show different effects. Therefore, Petty and Cacioppo (1986) introduced a comprehensive Elaboration-Likelihood Model (ELM) that emphasized two routes of persuasion: central and peripheral. The first type of persuasion is the one resulting from carefully processing the information presented in the persuasive message and it is regarded as a central route. On the other hand, peripheral route refers to the type of persuasion where there is no necessity for thoughtful consideration of information, but on processing of simple cues that can cause attitude change in some extent. Which one of these routes will be activated depends on the motivation and ability to process issue-relevant information in the message. Finally, attitude change that occurs under the central route is based on a thoughtful consideration of relevant message arguments and their integration into an overall position, while under the peripheral route attitude is based on a simple cue that provides some affective association or allows simple inference.

When it comes to tourism studies, the topic of persuasiveness was examined in the context of destination websites (Tang, Jang, & Morrison, 2012) where ELM was used as framework to understand communication process. Results showed that high elaboration of the website information is positively correlated with the involvement, while design characteristics were important antecedents of central or peripheral persuasion processing. According to

Teng, Khong, and Goh (2014), ELM is considered as a suitable model for processing persuasive messages on social media, which was also used to check the effectiveness and persuasiveness of Facebook practices (Atwood & Morosan, 2015). In studies on persuasiveness of online hotel reviews, effect of source, specificity of review content, and accreditation or certification logo on beliefs, attitudes, and purchasing behavior for ecoresort were examined (Sparks, Perkins, & Buckley, 2013). ELM was used as conceptual framework in Filieri and McLeay's (2014) study on identifying factors that influence travelers to adopt information from online reviews in decision making or extent to which consumers modify their behavior by utilizing the suggestions made in these. For the central route processing influence of six dimensions of information quality was tested, while information quantity and product ranking were used as cues for peripheral processing. Findings of this research implied that besides monitoring information quality, attention should be paid to persuasive cues such as categorical information, product rankings, metadata techniques, and content accuracy by displaying users' profile information. Effect of source credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness on reviews' reliability and impact were also examined (Filleri, 2015; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). Moreover, display of personal information, such as travel interest and location, can facilitate the evaluation of the reviewer's credibility, which can be useful in processing reviews for purchase intentions (Park, Xiang, Josiam, & Kim, 2014).

Special interest in the literature was placed on persuasiveness potential and handling of negative online customer reviews (Cheng & Loi, 2014; Lee, Park, & Han, 2008; Sparks, So, & Bradley, 2016). In their study, Lee et al. (2008) used ELM theory to explain the reaction of consumers to reviews by focusing on information processing procedures. It was concluded that participants conform to reviews and their attitudes become unfavorable as the proportion of negative reviews increases, with high-quality ones being more influential than those of low quality. Sparks et al. (2016) examined customers' perceptions and evaluations towards negative online reviews and any accompanying hotel response by examining multiple cues, such as mere presence of the response from management side, the person writing the response, voice of

responder, speed of response, and action frame on consumers' inference of trust and concern. Finally, Cheng and Loi (2014) examined the effects of management responses to negative online reviews on customers' purchasing intentions by looking at it from the perspective of ELM's central and peripheral routes and the presence of an offered outcome under distributive justice. Review responses with detailed description of the property followed with strong argument towards how hotel services lead to guest satisfaction were proposed as central route processing cues, while star ratings, awards quotations from third parties, and credible source were the peripheral ones. Findings imply that adoption of the central route in response to negative online reviews has significant positive effect on customers' purchasing intention. While outcomes that give rise to the distributive justice were not seen as a useful strategy for online review responses, quality and strong arguments are emphasized as successful cues in inducing central route processing.

What is absent in the current literature on persuasion regarding online hotel reviews is a more comprehensive look on persuasive communication occurring on the review platforms. By analyzing review content, travelers may perceive their own similarity with the attitudes expressed in these reviews. Appropriate management responses addressing review attitudes may also affect those of noncustomers when it comes to their purchasing decisions or perception of a hotel's corporate reputation. The key for the successful persuasive message from hotel management side is to define the proper cues that will trigger central or peripheral information processing, resulting in desired attitude change. Considering that ELM theory is the information processing theory, most of the studies used quantitative method to predict consumers' behavior (Teng et al., 2014) by adopting experimental or survey research designs to assess the effectiveness of different central and peripheral cues. However, only some of the cues, defined from previous marketing literature, were used as variables. In the current study, researchers attempt to derive a list of potential central and peripheral cues in the management responses to online hotel reviews. In order to do this, the authors use qualitative content analysis inside the multiple case study design for a more detailed description of this phenomenon.

### Methodology

This study followed a qualitative approach through multiple explanatory case study design (Yin, 2003) in order to answer research questions. Data were collected through four stages with various data collection methods used: document analysis of online available material for review platform users, participant observation in the consultant company involved with review management, online netnographic observation (Kozinets, 2010) of review platform, document analysis of reviews collected from three separate platforms for three hotels from different hotel chains located in Belek region in Turkey, and one-on-one interviews with nine stakeholders involved with hotel review management all operating in the same region of Antalya city in Turkey. Interview participants were members of the case hotels' staff responsible of responding to reviews, two consultant companies' workers, representatives of meta-search engine platforms and online travel agencies (OTAs) as well as hotel professionals with many years of experience in review management and business relationships with various review platforms.

Directed qualitative content analysis proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) was conducted on the obtained data set. Directed content analysis was considered useful as it corresponds to the studies interested in validating or extending the existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks in the interested scientific field. Analysis was conducted by following steps proposed by Schreier (2014) as follows: preparation, building code frame, pilot phase, main analysis, and reporting results. During the process of creating the code scheme, main categories were concept driven based on the theoretical frameworks of persuasive communication, attitude, and persuasive cues while a data-driven approach was used to derive the relevant subcategories for better explanation and understanding of the main categories (Schreier, 2014).

### Results and Discussion

Results of the analysis showed that all five components of persuasion proposed in Perloff's (2010) definition may be visible in the context of online hotel review platforms because it clearly involves

message transmission in the form of positive or negative evaluation about a certain property. Use of texts, photos, and videos refer to symbolic process where users are free to choose the platform for posting, reading, filtering, and searching reviews according to their needs. Moreover, it is up to readers how they will understand and cognitively process the reviews' information. Considering the reviews' effect on readers' travel decision making processes, attempt to influence is evident.

Initial coding scheme on persuasive communication was created based on the Yale model (Hovland et al., 1953) and upon completion of the analysis, a model of persuasive communication on online hotel review platforms (Fig. 1) was established. According to the proposed model, communicator or source of the communication is the platform itself, content in textual form such as reviews, but also videos or photos, are considered as a message factor while hotel management and review readers are seen as the audience component. All of these three main factors are further explained through subcategories derived during the analysis process.

Source of the persuasive communication in terms of online hotel review platforms consists of the platform itself and its users. In the spirit of Web 2.0 technology, users of these platforms are cocreators of the content and they also dictate, in a certain manner, how the communication on these websites will occur. Therefore, both platforms and its users are putting effort in intensifying their role and influence as communicators in terms of credibility, authority, and trustworthiness. Based on the analysis of documentation about these platforms, it can be concluded that what they all have in common are their efforts to animate their users to engage more with the platform by writing reviews evaluating the hotel property and its services or by responding to these reviews. On one side, hotel users are able to benefit from marketing and promotion potential through use of these platforms, while review writers can increase their visibility and usability on these platforms through collection of badges. In this manner platform users, both hotels and reviewers, are very influential in constructing dialogue regarding quality of the services in hotels, contributing to their individual credibility as sources while, on the greater level, they are actually contributing to the platform's overall credibility.

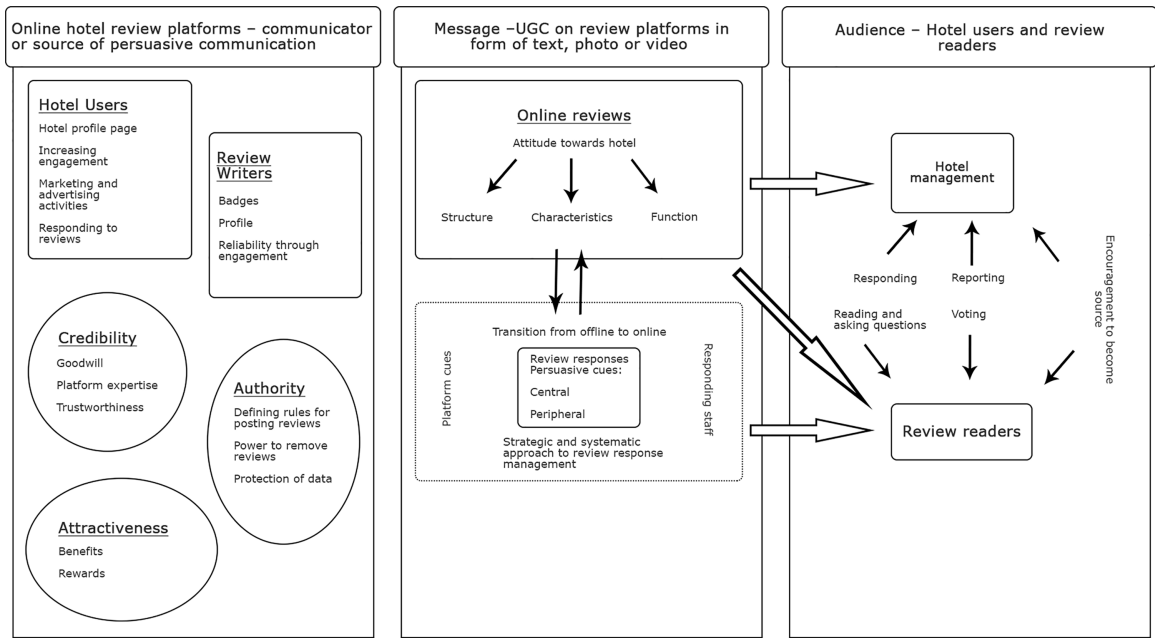


Figure 1. Model of persuasive communication on online hotel review platforms.

Three common characteristics of communicators in persuasive communication, such as credibility, authority, and attractiveness, are evident in the context of online review platforms as well. When it comes to credibility, review platforms try to communicate their expertise and experience in online review business by providing statistics about size of their community in number of users and reviews, years of doing business, and specialization for certain markets. Trustworthiness of the platform lies in the fact that the personal opinions of the hotel service users are being published and that they do not reflect the opinion of the platform owners or workers. Assurances from platforms that they do not interfere in review content in any way and that these are just the virtual spaces where people wish to help each other in travel information search and purchasing decisions are indicators of goodwill. Authority reflects in platform's ability to define rules for posting reviews, power to remove these, as well as assurances of data protection. Online review platforms are attractive because they bring different types of reward for both hotel users, in terms of high scores in guest reviews and rankings, as well as incentives for reviewers

in collecting points and badges. Platforms and reviews are beneficial for hotel owners as they can have insight into statistics, they can post special offers, they can see their position according to the competition, etc.

Message component in the review platforms context may appear in the form of UGC such as text, photo, or video on travel review platforms. Giving the highest points for reviewers who communicate their hotel experiences as textual messages, rather than just providing numerical ratings, implies that message transmission is what is valued the most in this form of communication. Main characteristics of these messages are their relevance, comprehensiveness, and enhancement of positive emotions. Relevance is a characteristic derived from the fact that reviews are coming from those who stayed in the hotel and had the chance to experience at least one aspect of its service. The platform itself guarantees for the content relevance by defining the rules that strictly prohibit posting content that can be unlawful or threatening for any audience segments, omitting commercials or the content that violates any copyrights and trademarks. Since these reviews are two-sided consisting of both positive and negative

evaluations implies their comprehensiveness. Finally, reviews should be family friendly without any offensive content or those that express words of hate, first-hand content on death, violence, criminal activities, or animal cruelty. Therefore, regardless of whether the evaluations about hotel are positive or negative, content shared in a friendly and positive spirit should enhance positive emotions among the platform users.

Aspects of the audience component that may be seen in the context of online review platforms are being manifested through audience involvement by reading and asking questions, voting, reporting, and responding on forums, and encouragement for audience to engage in review writing and become a source itself.

Study results showed that attitudes expressed in online hotel reviews can be cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally based, which corresponds with the related literature (Breckler, 1984). Cognitively based attitudes were derived based on rational reflections on attitude object, affective ones on reflection of people's expressions of feelings towards the object, while behavioral ones were indicating how people act or would act in encounter with the object. Three main categories of attitude structure with the related subcategories are presented in Table 1.

Since all case five-star resorts hotels are located in one of the most prominent touristic Turkish regions, it is understandable that guests are coming with high expectations. The level at which hotel properties managed to meet these expectations in

terms of hotel facilities, quality of service, location, and staff behavior may be considered as the subcategories of the cognitively based attitudes. Language proficiency, or personnel's ability to effectively communicate with the guests during their stay, was also perceived as rational basis for positive or negative evaluations. One of the hotels examined in this study offers guest-related web application with the aim to communicate more effectively with the guests and facilitate service provision. One of the easily interpreted cognitively based attitude's subcategories is value for money, meaning that hotel offers the best possible service for the money paid. In their evaluations, reviewers are reasoning that the hotel management is responsible for control of negative behavioral patterns among some guests because they are affecting other in-house guests' experiences. From collected online reviews it may be seen that some of the review writers use cognitive shortcuts or short summarizations of pros and cons of certain hotel property. These shortcuts can also be very useful in facilitating readers' cognitive processing of the presented information.

Many of the interviewed participants agreed that affective component of attitudes expressed in online reviews is fundamental:

Reviews are written based on experience. This means that, in its basis, each review is subjective, holding personal feelings and emotions.

There is the affective approach since holiday is generally an emotional concept. Going on holiday,

Table 1  
Main Categories of Attitudes Structure With Related Subcategories

Cognitive Attitudes	Affective Attitudes	Behavioral Attitudes
Meeting the expectations	Beyond expectations	Celebrating
Language proficiency	Emotions	Intention to return
Hotel facilities and services	Relaxation—enjoyment	Trying out new services and facilities
Quality of hotel service	Staff emotions and attitudes towards work	Participating at different activities
Cognitive shortcuts	Turkish hospitality	Atmosphere
Facilitating the service	Children's holiday	Holiday experience
Value for money	Special guest treatment	Behavior of other guests
Staff behavior		
Location		
Management of behavioral patterns and dynamics		



finding inner peace, relax, spend time with family are all emotional concepts. Therefore people are generally emotional in their reviews.

According to the social psychological theory on attitude structure, affective attitudes are considered those rooted in emotions, feelings, and values about different social objects regardless of potential rational perceptions of positive and negative aspects of this object (Zanna & Rempel, 1988). This theoretical proposition was being followed during the analysis of data obtained in this study when several affective subcategories were derived (Table 1). The first one refers to positive emotions that resulted from the quality of hotel properties and service that were beyond guest's expectations. In addition, feelings of relaxation, enjoyment, and special emphasis on different emotions guests experienced during their stay are also expressions of affectively based attitudes. How important are emotions in shaping people's attitude towards one hotel can be concluded from reviews that were illustrating guests' perception of hotel staff's emotions and attitudes towards their job. Turkish hospitality is an aspect of the service encounter which is highly appreciated in the context of five-star hotel resorts in Turkey. Since these hotels are well-known as splendid family holiday resorts, people are also rooting their evaluations in the perception of children's holiday. Parents will be emotionally satisfied if their children had great time during their holiday and they are emphasizing this aspect of their hotel experience while communicating their attitudes through online reviews. The final subcategory of affective attitude component is special treatment and guest care, which resulted in positive emotional feedbacks expressed in reviews.

Behavioral component of attitudes in reviews were derived based on observations of how one behaves towards certain attitude object, or hotel property and service in this context. Therefore, expressions of behavioral inclinations, intentions, commitments, and actions were comprised in Table 1. The first two subcategories were related to guests' coming to a certain hotel with intention to celebrate a special event or date in the reviewer's life and intention to return to a certain hotel. Another expression of behavioral component refers to trying out new services and facilities of the hotel

with guests' expressing their positive experiences and impressions. This finding was directly compatible with the propositions of self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), which claims that in a certain situation people can conclude how they feel and think about the object from the way how they behave towards it. Another behaviorally based attitude's subdimension reflects on taking part in different activities offered by the hotel property and the nice time the guests had while participating in these. A more abstract concept of behavioral component was one reported based on observing the others and sense of general atmosphere due to the overall flow of services and dynamics in the hotel. Also, when reviewers are providing overall evaluation of their holiday experience based on what they have lived throughout the whole hotel stay and all the services they have tried, it may be interpreted that their evaluations are behaviorally based ones. The final subcategory of this attitude component is related to behavior of other guests in the hotel and misunderstandings and annoyance from the behavioral patterns of others. Evaluations of this kind were derived from observations of other guests' behavioral patterns and how reviewers responded to these.

Most of the attitude characteristics proposed by the literature were detected in this study and these are strength, specificity, explicitness, generality, and ambivalence. Strong attitude reviews are presented in the form of highly positive or highly negative evaluations, which are characterized by personal relevance, ego-involvement, extreme, certainty, knowledge, and hierarchical organization where reviewers use storytelling technique to offer vivid description of their holiday, in a clear essay structure. One of the important characteristics of attitudes is the ambivalence, when people evaluate one attitude object, person, or issue both positively and negatively (Thompson et al., 1995). Ambivalent attitudes imply uncertainty, conflict between attitude elements, and inconsistency in evaluation through different dimensions of an attitude (Baumeister & Finkel, 2010). These are hard to be detected by the computer word-processing software as they may involve irony, unusual grammatical writings, etc. Thus, ambivalent attitudes expressed in online reviews may be productive and useful for hotels in defining future review management strategies.

In addition, results showed that attitudes in hotel reviews have certain functions, which may vary in the level of significance for the person that holds them. Reasons for people holding and expressing certain attitudes toward hotel property in an online review are: knowledge and reasoning facilitator, behavior energizer, utilitarian, value-expressive, social-adjustive, and social identity function, where reviewers are observed as brand representatives and communicators of their offline and/or online status. In addition, ego-defensive function was recognizable in cases when the reviewer makes comparisons with the competitive hotel property as well as by the reviewer's desire to be noticed by the wider audience of readers and hotel management.

Data analysis also revealed the context in which online hotel reviews should be observed, approached, and managed. This context implies transition from offline to online environment or transfer of real life (offline) hotel experience into the online environment, which forces hotel management to enroll into online review platforms to locate the evaluations of these experiences. In order to answer to these reviews in an appropriate manner, hotel representatives should go back to the offline environment where the service encounter occurs to check validity of descriptions from the reviews. Once all the aspects of the service mentioned in the review are checked, the hotelier is ready to log in to the virtual platform and leave hotel's response to the review that will, from that moment on, stay displayed in the online environment. A second aspect of review response context relates to increasing a hotel's Internet visibility and presence on online review platforms through strategic and systematic approach to response management. This means that

the hotel should work on defining review responding procedures, by taking a stance towards what is going to be accepted by the hotel management and limits of tolerance for some negative aspects of hotel service perceived by the reviewer, conducting research about the sources and validity of evaluations, and, finally, analyzing the overall reviews. Importance of the hotel staff, especially the CRM department, responsible for responding to guests' reviews was put forward with emphasis on the necessity for this personnel to have additional knowledge in sociology and psychology. Finally, it is necessary to be aware of persuasive cues embedded inside review platforms such as awards quotations, forewarnings, ratings, and rankings, with some of them already being tested as peripheral cues (Cheng & Loi, 2014).

When addressing the final research question regarding persuasive cues, initial coding scheme used during content analysis consisted of central and peripheral cues from the literature. After the analysis, final lists of central and peripheral cues that could be found in the hotel management's review responses in the current study were derived (Table 2).

Central cue that was first detected during the analysis was institutionally defined response framework consisting of several elements such as: expressing gratitude for writing review, informing about hotel facilities and services, communicating hotel goals, apology, actions taken by hotel, offering alternative solution, and welcoming again. This framework with similar elements was also evident in the study of Zhang and Vasquez (2014), who derived a typical sequence of moves that occur in many hotel responses to negative reviews, as well

Table 2  
Persuasive Cues in Hotel Management Review Responses

Central Cues	Peripheral Cues
Institutionally defined response framework	Existence of response
Customizing response based on review content	Automatic response
Place importance on guests	Relevancy of the response writer
Emphasis on complaint	Psychological message
Defense	Timing
Referring to opinion of others	
Repeating positive aspects	
Originality/creativity	

as in the study of Levy et al. (2013), who also mentioned appreciation, apologies, and explanation for the hotel failure in review responses. When analyzing hotels' responses in the current study, it was evident that they used responses as an opportunity to inform the audience about some important aspects of their property or service they provide and to communicate their business goal, regardless of whether these responses were directed towards negative, positive, or ambivalent reviews. In addition, in this study authors proposed sequence of moves in responses for various types of reviews as follows:

- **Positive reviews:** Expressing gratitude for writing review; mentioning hotel facilities and service; communicating hotel goals; welcoming again.
- **Ambivalent reviews:** Expressing gratitude for writing review; mentioning hotel facilities and service; communicating hotel goals; apology; actions taken by hotel; welcoming again.
- **Negative reviews:** Expressing gratitude for writing review; communicating hotel goals; apology; actions taken by hotel; offering alternative solution; welcoming again.

Besides an appropriate responding framework, building the review responses based on the review content will assure quality of the arguments. Quality of arguments was considered as the central cue in Cheng and Loi's study (2014), which affects the direction of information processing. It was found that this cue was among those that can induce a central route, which in context of responses to negative reviews may have a significant positive effect on customer's purchasing intentions. In order to increase quality of arguments, it is necessary to address the attitude structure, characteristic, and function for better understanding of guest's specific evaluation and, accordingly, reflect on these in the review response. In addition, hotel management should assure that importance is being given to the reviewer. In this context, special attention should be placed on attitude functions expressed in the review, especially those with ego-defensive, social identity, or value-expressive functions as these are the ones related with the individual's core value and/or social status. By properly addressing these functions in responses, management can show how

much it cares for its reviewers. Moreover, appreciation for the reviewer may be observed from the balance between the length of the review and length of the response. This is especially the case with strong attitude reviews, which have a tendency to be rather long in their content. Accordingly, review response should also be of a certain length, which may satisfy and show respect towards the reviewer's time and effort.

Specific attitudes expressed in reviews, especially those containing complaints, have the potential to attract a reader's attention. Therefore, management's emphasis on complaints related to the hotel's facility or service can be regarded as central cue. Emphasis on complaints will give the impression of hotel paying attention to details and being ready to cope with difficulties. However, according to the interview participants, there are situations when the hotel should provide defense regarding the claims expressed in reviews:

There are some reviews where defense is needed, because guest may not be telling the truth. I check the hotel cameras and I speak to my personnel. If this is the first time that I hear about this issue I am implying that a guest was supposed to report it to us.

It is on hoteliers to objectively inform what aspects of the service can and cannot be improved. In these situations, it is up to readers to judge on whose arguments they should rely on.

Results of other studies on online review responses showed the variations or degree to which they refer back to a customer's review and extent to which they provided detailed explanations to the issues presented in the review (Zhang & Vasquez, 2014). This emphasis on the importance of customizing responses based on the review content and emphasis on complaints can be regarded as one more proof that these two cues derived in the current study should be considered as the central ones.

One of the interview participants mentioned that they recommend to their hotel clients to encourage their previous satisfied and loyal guests to leave their reviews on some of the online review platforms:

We say to some of our clients (hotels) to ask from their previous and loyal customers to share their

opinions on the platforms as another perspective against some negative reviews.

Besides this strategy, hoteliers should also count on brand representatives or those guests who wish to express their attitudes on certain hotels in order to fulfill their social identity by providing useful information and contributing to the good image of the hotel. Repetition as a central cue introduced in the previous literature (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) was also evident in the current study. Although it is good to repeat the positive aspects of hotel property or services, it is not advisable to repeat the negative ones since management would wish to avoid further strengthening of the negative image of the hotel:

Do not repeat negatives—do not reinforce the message. Highlight positives—even in case of bad review you have the chance to talk positive about your hotel.

Data analyzed from various data sources emphasized the necessity to be creative and original in responding to users' review, but at the same it can be concluded that it is one of the hardest cues to define:

Be original. This is the most important, but it is difficult. It is a hotelier's job. The good ones use irony and creativity in a positive sense.

Original content and creativity of the response writer is what catches attention of the readers. This is of crucial importance to diversify content of specific hotel property among many similar content from other hotels.

Existence of the responses, even the automatic ones, was derived as peripheral cue showing appreciation for the reviewer and work on the hotel's online reputation. Importance of managerial responses was emphasized in the previous literature as their existence can generate up to 60% more online bookings (Ye et al., 2008). On the other hand, automatic responses are usually used in the situation when hoteliers wish to show their presence but they lack time and personnel for review management. However, this cannot be perceived as an effective persuasive cue, since there are no extra arguments and aspects that have the potential to induce any serious cognitive processing.

Although the position or department where the response writer works may have a certain influence on the reader, review platforms emphasize more text of response rather than additional information of the writer. Therefore, relevancy of the response writer may be considered as a peripheral cue in cognitive processing of the review response. Another peripheral cue is the psychological message left somewhere "between the lines" in responses for the reader, implying that he/she should contact directly the hotel in case of any dispute, especially complaints. Timing of response is information that is visible on the platform and many hotels are retrospectively replying to old reviews. Although there are studies in which the necessity for the hoteliers to promptly react on reported service failures to induce more favorable assessments of their service (Sparks et al., 2013) were emphasized, if the reader is not carefully processing this particular information it may not be significant for cognitive processing. Therefore, timing can also be considered as a potential peripheral cue.

### Conclusion

An online review platform represents an environment that allows functioning of three basic factors of persuasive communication: source, message, and audience. When analyzing tourism literature, it can be concluded that online travel/hotel reviews are significantly influential for both tourism's demand and supply side, which makes them a successful persuasive tool. Online hotel review represents the content where people express their attitudes (positive or negative evaluations about the certain hotel), which can differ in terms of their structure, characteristics, and functions. Attitudes are starting points that should be examined in order to derive the successful strategies in trying to affect these. Significance of the current study lies in its interdisciplinary approach towards establishing more comprehensive theoretical framework of persuasive communication occurring on hotel review platforms, based on knowledge derived from the field of social psychology but also benefiting from concepts and theories applied in the field of information technologies.

Through case study research design and by conducting qualitative content analysis, researchers

derived extensive list of categories and subcategories related to attitude's components and persuasive cues that can be influential in cognitive processing of five-star hotels reviews at a mass tourism destination. Future studies can be conducted in order to further develop the measurement scales regarding the effectiveness of persuasive communication.

Though most of the people perceive a persuasive communication in negative context and that it necessarily has to attempt to change someone's attitude, literature showed that besides changing, this type of communication may be used for shaping and reinforcing cognitive responses among the attitude holders and communicator of the persuasive message (Miller, 1980). What was not previously clearly presented in the tourism literature is the description of context in which review responses are generated, which is another contribution of the current study. In order to use review platforms' full persuasive potential, it is necessary for hotel management to define its presence and visibility on these platforms, to conduct in-depth analysis of structure, characteristics, and functions of attitudes expressed in reviews and establish a more systematic approach towards creation of review responses containing central and peripheral cues with potential to induce desired cognitive information processing.

There are certain limitations of the current study in terms of generalization of results, since specific aspects of the attitude components and persuasive cues were derived through case study approach on a selected sample of five-star hotels. Therefore, findings of the current study should be examined in other contexts as well. Considering the research questions and research design, concept of online hotel platform persuasiveness was inspected from the hotel management and platform providers' perspective. Future studies should have audience component in its focus since personality and motivation-related information for this component could not be derived in the current study.

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