

## **Rate my firm: cultural differences in service evaluations**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** - Cross-cultural research constitutes a pivotal topic for marketing however, the literature indicates that there are a few studies analyzing social media reviews from a cross-cultural perspective using cultural proximity (supra-national level) as a proxy of culture. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify cross cultural differences in service evaluations and specifically, in hotel appraisals among tourists from Central, Eastern (including Post-Soviet States), Northern and Southern Europe.

**Method** – A quantitative approach has been taken by studying online user-generated ratings of hotels on Trip Advisor. In total, 1,055 reviews of five hotels in Greece were used for the study.

**Findings** – MANOVA and ANOVAs results confirm cultural differences in overall service evaluations and attributes (value, location, sleeping quality, rooms, cleanliness, service) of tourists from various European regions. Specifically, Eastern Europeans uploaded more reviews than any other European group whereas Northern Europeans were more generous in their appraisals than Eastern, Southern and Central Europeans.

**Practical Implications** – The results of the study could be used for segmentation purposes of the European tourism market and for recognizing which aspects of their services need to be improved based on the segments they serve. Moreover, managers should encourage Northern and Eastern Europeans to upload their reviews since both groups are more generous in their evaluations. Moreover, the findings are useful to marketers of other services.

**Originality/Value** – To the author’s knowledge, this is the first study that examines cross-cultural differences in hotel appraisals from a supra-national perspective including developed (Northern and Western Europe), developing (Southern Europe) and emerging tourism markets (Eastern Europe).

**Keywords:** cultural proximity, supra-national culture, user generated reviews, social media, Eastern Europe

## **Introduction**

A sizeable number of service providers are marketing their services globally resulting in the fastest-growing area of international trade (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007). The significant increase of the international trade of services has created several opportunities and challenges in how services should be delivered (standardization vs. adaptation) due to the influence of culture on customers’ perceptions (Zeithaml et al., 2002), expectations, and behavior. A thorough understanding of the role of culture in the service delivery processes is more vital than ever for international services marketing and service firms (Zhang, Beatty and Walsh, 2008). Therefore, cross-cultural research becomes a necessary research direction in the services marketing literature.

Cross-cultural research constitutes a pivotal topic for marketing as a significant determinant of individual and collective consumption behavior. Different groups embrace different values, norms, and attitudes consequently consumer behavior also differs in various cultures (Richardson and Crompton, 1988). Culture is considered to be one of the most significant factors in explaining consumer behavior, and therefore, understanding cultural

similarities and differences is very valuable for international marketing. Delving into these differences can provide precise measures for targeting and positioning services (Reisinger and Turner, 2002), improving service delivery and customizing to a certain degree service offerings. Cross-cultural research is performed to identify and compare similarities and differences in consumer behavior among sub-cultures within the same country or cultures among different countries (Sussmann and Rashcovsky, 1997) or among groups of countries (Felbermayr and Toubal, 2010). Although there is a significant volume of cross-cultural research on consumer behavior in relation to goods, there is very limited in services. Therefore, Zhang, Beatty and Walsh (2008, p. 222) in their review of literature related to cross-cultural consumer service research argue that “Although there have been studies looking at the role of culture in each area (i.e., expectation, evaluation, and reaction to service experiences), more is needed to enrich our current understanding of variations, as well as commonalities of consumers' service experiences across cultures.”

Tourism as a powerful service sector driving economic growth and development is growing dramatically over the past decades and reached 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals in 2018 (WNTTO, 2019). It is widely acknowledged that due to new technologies and market globalization, tourism is becoming more and more international and marketers have antagonized for increasingly multicultural marketplaces. Therefore, the research agenda in tourism has been shifted to the use of new technologies in combination with cross-cultural approaches. Cross-cultural studies in tourism focus on identifying differences among tourists in relation to travel motivations (Kay, 2009; Kozak, 2002), information search behavior (Gursoy and Umbreit, 2004; Jordan *et al.*, 2013), travel patterns (Lee and Sparks, 2007; Sussmann and Rashcovsky, 1997), behavioral characteristics (Kim and Prideaux, 2003; Kozak and Tasci, 2005; Pizam and Reichel, 1996), satisfaction (Tasci and Boylu, 2010) complain behavior (DeFranco *et al.*, 2005; Yuksel *et al.*, 2006), and decision making process (Correia *et al.*, 2011). The above studies use ethnicity or

nationality to investigate and interpret cross-cultural differences in tourism. Although Pizam and Sussman (1995) have argued that “in the process of globalization and convergence of cultures, national culture should not be discarded” (p. 905) in explaining cultural differences, this study uses cultural proximity at the supra-national level (groups of countries). “Cultural proximity relates to the sharing of a common identity, to the feeling of belonging to the same group, and to the degree of affinity between two countries” (Felbermayr and Toubal, 2010, p. 279). There is a significant gap of research on cross cultural research on tourism using cultural proximity in identifying similarities/differences in tourism behavior. Moreover, the use of cultural clusters of countries based on their cultural proximity might be a more appropriate and useful approach for tourism, due to its nature (targeting tourists from various countries).

The rise of digital technology and social media have empowered consumers and transformed them into co-producers of digital content. The spectacular growth of user-generated content (UGC) and, specifically, reviews (UGRs) on social media platforms provides a huge quantity of information that allows for the first hand ascertaining of the experiences, opinions, and feelings of tourism customers (Marine-Roig and Clavé 2015; Xiang et al. 2015). In tourism research, there is a tremendous growth in online tourism reviews, especially in the hospitality sector (Marine-Roig and Clavé 2015). For instance, in 2017 the world largest travel community, Trip Advisor, asserted that it reached more than 630 million evaluations and reviews (Tripadvisor.com. 2018). Trivago reached 140 million integrated user hotel reviews, Booking collected 43 million verified reviews, and Expedia gathered 11 million customer reviews in 2015. UGRs in tourism and travel play an important role in the tourism industry because they provide ideas to tourists for the trip planning process and increase their confidence by reducing risk and making better decisions (Gretzel and Yoo 2008). Given such figures, UGRs should be identified as a valuable source of big data that is useful for the management of tourism services. Moreover, current research highlights the importance of online UGRs to business performance in tourism.

Although cross-cultural research in services is relatively new, it has tremendous potential for developing insights into the services marketing (Zhang, Beatty and Walsh, 2008) and tourism literature. The extensive review of the cross-cultural services literature on consumer behavior by Zhang, Beatty and Walsh (2008, see Table 3) indicated that service research in this area is limited to national comparisons (national cultures), to offline settings and to certain countries. There is a significant gap in the service literature on cross-cultural consumer research at the supra-national level using cultural clusters while online consumer behavior from a cross-cultural perspective is still in its infancy. Moreover, there is a substantial knowledge gap regarding consumer behavior in online and offline services from Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe (CESEE) and Post-Soviet States. Furthermore, there is a significant lack of research regarding offline and online behavior of tourists coming from countries of this region. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to enrich the cross-cultural service research on consumer online behavior. It aims at identifying cross-cultural differences in hotel appraisals among tourists from various European regions (Central, Eastern Northern and Southern Europe). Specifically, the objectives of the study are a) to profile tourists based on their online evaluations of hotel attributes on a major social media, Trip Advisor, b) to identify similarities/differences among tourists from various regions of Europe in their online hotel evaluations and c) to profile tourists from Eastern (Post-Soviet) European countries. It is hoped that this study can a) enrich the services marketing literature on the role of culture on the online customer behavior and specifically on online service evaluations; b) advance cross-cultural service research methodologically by proposing the use of supranational cultural clusters based on their cultural proximity as the level of analysis; c) enrich the tourism marketing literature regarding tourism evaluation behavior from customers of various European regions, d) shed light on online evaluation behavior of customers from Eastern (Post-Soviet) European countries and e) document the cross-cultural differences and similarities of tourists in the online environment, and thus provide useful insights for tour planners, hotel

marketing managers and tourism managers in general. To the author's knowledge this is the first study that compares online tourist behavior in various European cultural clusters and the only one that emphasizes Eastern European tourists' behavior on UGC.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the next section provides the background of this research by reviewing existing studies in cross-cultural tourist behavior and in user generated content and reviews in tourism. In the Methods section, the design of the research is explained. Findings are then presented and discussed. Finally, managerial implications for tourism marketers as well as limitations of this study and recommendations for future research are discussed.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### ***The Influence of Culture on Consumer Behavior***

In a continuously globalized society guided by dynamic technological developments and increasing economic interdependence between countries, culture is becoming more and more important. Culture has been conceptualized in terms of values and belief systems (Hofstede, 2001), communication system (Hall, 1976) and material aspects such as symbols and artifacts (McCracken, 1986). The most prominent and widely used framework of culture is that of Hofstede's. According to Hofstede "Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (2011, p. 3). Hofstede *et al.* (2010) identified six dimensions of culture named *Power Distance*, *Uncertainty Avoidance*, *Individualism/Collectivism*, *Masculinity/Femininity*, *Long Term/Short Term Orientation (Confucian dynamism)*, and *Indulgence/Restraint*. *Power Distance* refers to "the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally" (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2011, p. 182). In cultures with high power distance, hierarchy is strong, power is centralized at the top, the social status of an individual is clear and others should

recognize and respect it. In cultures with low power distance, power is more equally distributed and subordinates have a sense of equality in relation to their superiors (Usunier and Lee, 2005). *Uncertainty Avoidance* denotes the level of stress in a society regarding an unknown future, unstructured situations, and ambiguity. In high uncertainty cultures, people are less open to change and innovation, need more rules and formality to organize their life. In low uncertainty cultures, a tendency to risk is perceived as a requirement for efficiency (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2011; Usunier and Lee, 2005). *Individualism/Collectivism* concerns “people looking after themselves and their immediate family only versus people belonging to in-groups that look after them in exchange for loyalty” (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2011, p. 182). Individualistic cultures are “I” conscious, rely on one-self, and are low-context with explicit verbal communication (self-reliance). In collectivistic cultures, individuals rely on others and their identity is based on the social system where people belong to (social dependence). Collectivistic cultures are “we” conscious and high-context communication cultures with implicit (indirect) verbal communication. According to Hall (1976, p. 91) ‘a high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context communication is just the opposite; i.e. the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code’. Gudykunst et al. (1996) identified high context communication to be indirect, ambiguous, maintaining of harmony, reserved and understated. In contrast, low context communication was identified as direct, precise, dramatic, open, and based on feelings or true intentions.

*Masculinity/Femininity* indicates the division of emotional roles between women and men. In masculine cultures achievement, performance, assertiveness, and success are valued whereas in feminine cultures good relationships, tolerance, caring for others, and quality of life. In low masculinity cultures, male and female roles overlap and household shopping and work is shared between wife and husband. *Long Term/Short Term Orientation* refers to the choice of focus for

people's efforts: the future or the present and past. "Values included in long-term orientation are perseverance, ordering relationships by status and observing this order, thrift, and having a sense of shame. The opposite is short-term orientation, which includes personal steadiness and stability, respect for tradition, and the pursuit of happiness rather than pursuit of peace of mind." (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2011, p. 183). *Indulgence/Restraint* refers to the gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life. These dimensions have been often used in the literature to identify differences/similarities among cultures and subcultures, national cultures and clusters of cultures.

In collectivistic cultures the self is part of and depends on others and the surrounding social context and the relationships incorporating it. For example, self-esteem in collectivistic cultures is related to the relationship with others and not to a sense of independence and superiority as in individualistic cultures (Nezlek, Kafetsios and Smith, 2008). Moreover, in individualistic cultures, personality traits are stable and abstract whereas in collectivistic ones vary by social roles and behavior is impacted by the context (Church et al. 2006). In collectivistic cultures there is no consistent relationship between behavior and attitudes as it is in individualistic cultures. Thus, in collectivistic cultures behavior might precede attitudes (Chang and Chieng, 2006). Moreover, communication differs between collectivistic (high context) and individualistic (low context) cultures. For example, the expression, intensity and meaning of emotions differ between cultures. In collectivistic cultures emotions are more moderated whereas in individualistic cultures are highly expressing especially if they are related to happiness and surprise (Matsumoto, Yoo and Fontaine, 2008). Kim et al. (1998) reported that people from collectivistic, high-context cultures such as China and Korea are more socially oriented, less confrontational, and more contented about life than people from an individualistic, low context culture such as the United States.

In services marketing, cross –cultural research using Hofstede’s model has been applied in service expectations, service, service evaluations and reactions to service failures and recovery actions (Zhang, Beatty and Walsh, 2008). Hofstede’s model has been applied in several services such as in banking (Donthu and You, 1998; Furrer et al., 2000; Liu and McClure, 2001; Malhotra et al., 2005), grocery, fast food, and supermarkets (Brady et al., 2005; Espinoza, 1999) and their findings indicated cultural variations in customer behavior in services. Specifically, cross-cultural research on service evaluations indicates that customers from different cultures perceive and evaluate service quality in a different way (Witkowski and Wolfenbarger, 2002) while they focus on different factors or cues in their evaluation of services (Imrie, 2005; Mattila, 1999).

In addition, Hofstede’s model has been used in tourism to study travel motivations (Kim and Lee 2000; Ressinger and Mavondo, 2005), to segment tourism markets (Prebensen 2005) and destination image (Litvin and Kar, 2003), travel safety and anxiety (Ressinger and Mavondo, 2005), risk taking behaviors (Crotts, 2004), and group travel behavior (Meng, 2010). In relation to after travel behaviors such as travel evaluations, satisfaction, loyalty, and future intentions, studies have used mainly three Hofstede’s dimensions either to predict or explain tourism behavior. Individualism/Collectivism was the most often used dimension (Mattila, 1999; Hsu and Kang, 2003; Litvin and Kar, 2004; Prebensen, 2005; Tsang and Ap, 2007) followed by power distance (Mattila, 1999; Hsu and Kang, 2003; Tsang and Ap, 2007) and Masculinity/Femininity (Crotts and Erdmann, 2000; Crotts and Litvin, 2003). Mattila (1999) reported that tourists from Western cultures (low context) rely mainly on tangible cues in their service evaluations rather than intangible ones as their Asian counterparts (high context). Only Hsu, Woodside and Marshall (2013) studied all dimensions of Hofstede’s model in tourism and concluded that “cultural values work better than individual values alone in explaining and predicting consumer behavior.....and the degree of cultural influences is greater for holiday travelers than for travelers visiting family and friends and greater for first-time visitors than for repeat visitors” (p.

698-699). In all of the above studies, the cultural values of Hofstede's model have been found relevant in understanding tourist behavior throughout the tourism experience, before, during and after the trip (Manrai and Manrai, 2011). However, all the above studied relied on offline data and none of them used online tourism services evaluations in identifying cultural differences based on Hofstede's model. Moreover, there is a significant lack of related research on Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe (CESEE) and Post-Soviet States.

### ***Cultural Proximity – Supra National Cultural Clusters***

In addition to nationality, cultural proximity has been also used in identifying behavioral differences in cross-cultural studies. Cultural proximity has been distinguished into affective, normative and interactive (Szytniewski et al., 2017). Affective proximity refers to 'those who are socially close to us are those we feel close to and vice versa' (Karakayali, 2009, p. 540).

Normative proximity relies on group membership and collectively recognized norms and values, and cultural identity of a specific group (Karakayali, 2009). In interactive proximity "the more a person needs to adapt, the less culturally, but also socially proximate the person may feel" (Szytniewski, *et al.*, 2017, p. 66). Interactive proximity is a function of the frequency, length and form of interactions (Szytniewski *et al.*, 2017).

Cultural proximity indicates that the level of analysis should be made on supra national cultural clusters and by identifying cultural differences at a regional level. Beugelsdijk *et al.* (2017, p. 35) argue that "There is abundant empirical evidence that cultural differences may be more region- than country-specific, in that countries cluster at the supra-national level in well-known cultural zones. This means that cultural values exhibit marked discrete jumps at the boundaries of these supra-national cultural zones, which are more pronounced than the differences at the country levels." In line with this reasoning, Peterson and Barreto have argued that "Countries having a history of close ties because of proximity, trade, conquest or religion

show more similar cultural values due to institutional transmission than do countries lacking such ties” (Peterson & Barreto, 2015, p. 26).

Conventional measures of cultural proximity refer to linguistics (common language and linguistic roots), ethnic, religious, legal origin, political ties, genetic distance, and somatic distance (Ginsburgh, 2005; Guiso *et al.*, 2009) which have been found to affect evaluations and grading (Ginsburgh, 2005) and economic exchange (Guiso *et al.*, 2009). Kaasa, Vadi and Varblane (2013) found that Finland, Norway, Ireland and Hungary are quite homogeneous in terms of power distance (low), uncertainty avoidance (low), masculinity (low), individualism (low) and family related collectivism (low) whereas Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Sweden and United Kingdom differ in the above cultural dimensions.

In tourism, to the author’s knowledge, cultural proximity has not being studied yet with the exception of three studies. One research shows that ‘cultural proximity’ has an impact on the image of North Portugal as a rural tourist destination, with differences identified for three levels of proximity (high-medium-low) (Kastenholz, 2010). The second study examined socio-cultural proximity and distance with regard to cross-border shopping tourism and encounters with differences in daily life practices (Szytniewski *et al.*, 2017). Finally, Ryan (2002) studied indigenous tourism and the role of cultural and spatial difference in European conceptualizations of the exotic other. He supports that although there is a common cultural antecedence between non-Maori and European culture, the lack of spatial distance between Maori and tourists means that European New Zealanders are not drawn to Maori culture as an attraction in the manner that those from Europe and North America are. In addition, there is a lack of research using Hofstede’s model of cultural values above the national level. Hofstede’s model has been used at the individual, group/organizational, and country level but not at the supranational level. Moreover, the majority of the country level studies examined the impact of cultural distance

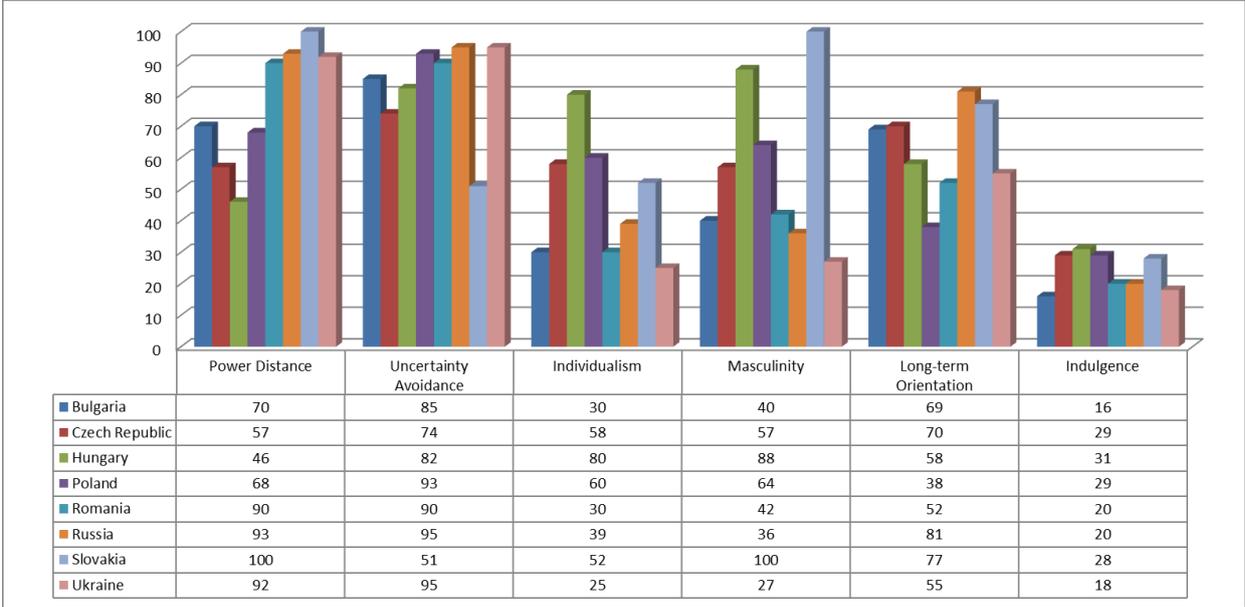
between countries and did not use clusters of nations based on their cultural proximity (Kirkman, Lowe and Gibson, 2006). Taking into account the above arguments and the lack of related literature on tourism, the present study uses cultural proximity (supra-national cultural clusters) instead of nationality or ethnicity as proxy of culture in order to identify similarities/differences among online generated reviews. This approach is in line with Fotis *et al.* (2012) who supported that in order to identify differences in social media use, scope, and trust in tourism, studies should not focus on closely related national cultures but on comparing distant national cultures.

In this study, Europe was divided into four major supra-national cultural clusters: eastern, northern, southern and western. This categorization is based on the United Nations geoscheme and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The eastern European cluster consisted of Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Georgia, Poland, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine. The northern European group referred to Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, and United Kingdom. The southern European cluster included Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Cyprus, Italy, North Macedonia, Malta, Montenegro, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia and Spain. Finally, the western European group consisted of Austria, Belgium, France Germany, Luxemburg, the Netherlands and Switzerland. The above clustering solution is based to a large degree on the geographical and cultural proximity between countries.

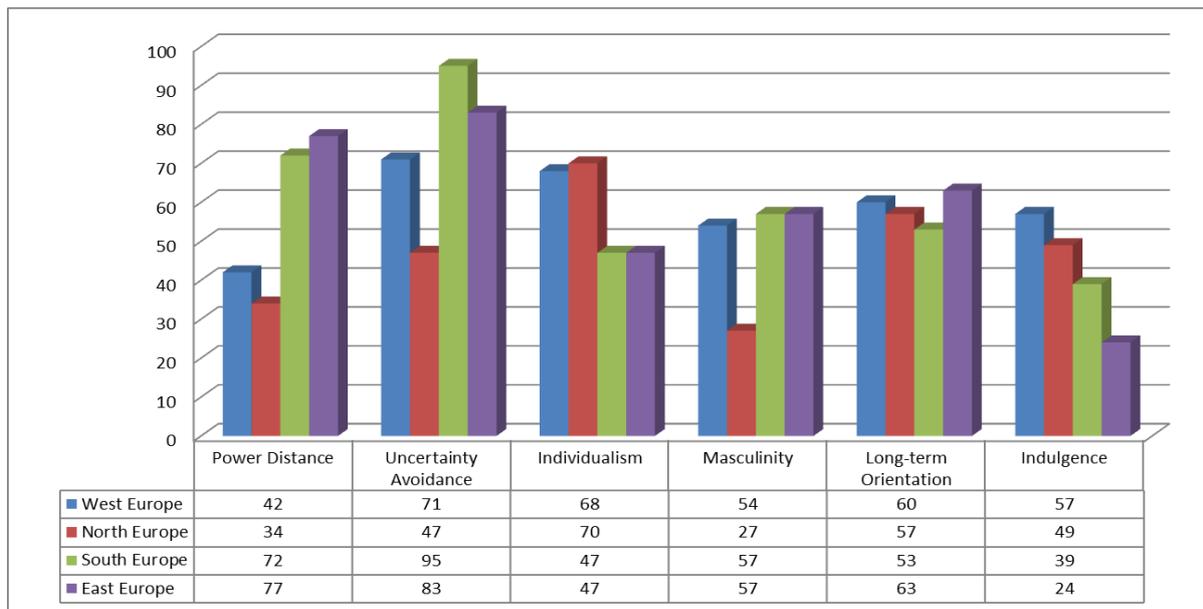
Due to their importance as emerging markets that are characterized by fast developing economies and tourism markets, emphasis will be given to the Eastern Europe region. Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine used to be states of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from 1922 until 1991 (Ardichvili and Gasparishvili, 2001). However, the remaining countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) were also under the political, institutional, and economic influence of USSR. As a result, all these countries have common economic, political and historical backgrounds and can be considered as

sharing several common cultural values such as collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and high power distance (Figure 1). Based on Hofstede’s model, Eastern European countries are high in power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, long-term orientation and restraint (Figure 2). It has been proposed the use of Hofstede’s model in understanding Eastern European countries not only to foreign companies entering this market but also to local companies in understanding the cultural changes that take place over time (Jayaram, Manrai and Manrai, 2015).

**Figure 1** Hofstede’s six cultural value scores in Eastern European countries (missing related data from Belarus, Moldova and Georgia) Source: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com>



**Figure 2** Hofstede’s six cultural values mean scores in each European cluster of the study



### ***Cross Cultural Research in Tourism***

It has been suggested that differing cultural norms and values can result in bound expectations and perceptions. For example, Puick and Katz (1986) support that culture provides the framework for social interactions, social rules, and customer expectations that are related to service encounters and are likely to vary from culture to culture. Each national culture tends to ascribe different levels of importance to various dimensions of service delivery. For example, French customers perceive competence, listening and dedication from service employees to contribute more to the evaluation of the service encounter than the effectiveness of the service does (Chandon *et al.*, 1997). Indian customers value functional elements such as competence, security, courtesy, responsiveness and how they feel during the service delivery (Keillor *et al.*, 2004). British and French customers tend to have different service expectations (Smith and Reynolds, 2001) while British customers tend to be more courteous in comparison to Germans (Witkowski and Wolfenbarger, 2002). Therefore, differences in expectations and perceptions of service attributes are expected to exist across cultures.

Cultural differences have often been considered as the basis for specific “stereotypes” characterizing tourists from specific national origins. For example, French and Italians have been stereotyped as excessively demanding (Boissevian and Inglott 1979), English have been characterized as stiff, socially-conscious and honest (Pi-Sunyer, 1977), and Americans are considered as cautious, calculating and purposeful (Brewer, 1978). In tourism, studies have indicated that significant differences exist among tourists from different countries throughout the service delivery process. Specifically, variations have been identified in tourists motives (Kozak, 2002), in the preferred destination attributes (Prebensen *et al.*, 2003), and activities (e.g., shopping, visiting museums, buying gifts, or photographing) (Pizam and Sussman, 1995; Pizam and Reichel, 1996), perceptions of destination images (Mackay and Fesenmaier, 2000; Lee and Lee, 2009), satisfaction with tourist attractions, facilities, prices and services (Kozak, 2001; Yu and Golden, 2006; Tsang and Ap, 2007), expected service quality (Kvist and Klefsjo, 2006), complaint behavior (DeFranco *et al.*, 2005; Yuksel *et. al.*, 2006), switching behavior (Lin and Mattila, 2006) and service evaluation criteria (Witkowski and Wolfinbarger, 2002).

At the supranational level, Tsang and Ap (2007) used Hofstede’s dimensions and examined cultural differences between Asian and Western tourists’ perceptions of relational quality service provided by guest-contact employees in Hong Kong. Their study showed that Asian tourists (collectivistic, high power distance cultures) gave significantly lower ratings for all the relational service quality attributes compared to their Western counterparts (individualistic, low power distance cultures). Specifically, they found that quality of interpersonal relationships determined the Asian tourists’ service-encounter evaluations, while Western tourists placed emphasis on goal completion, efficiency, and time saving. In their cross-cultural analysis of travel service tourist evaluations, Crotts and Erdmann (2000) applied Hofstede’s model and found significant differences between respondents’ evaluations dependent on the respondents’ country of birth. They surveyed tourists in-flight and airport that came from five different “countries of

birth” (the United Kingdom, Brazil, Taiwan, Japan, and Germany) and studied differences related to country level of masculinity/femininity using Hofstede’s (1980) model. The sample was split into three categories: high masculinity (Japan), middle masculinity (UK, Germany) and low masculinity (Brazil and Taiwan). Their results showed that tourists from high masculinity countries (Japan) complained more about the quality of airline and airport facilities, assigned lower evaluation scores and more often sat in business or first class on the aircraft than respondents from medium (UK, Germany) and low masculinity (Brazil, Taiwan) countries.

### ***Online Tourism Reviews on Social Media***

The internet helps in generating value-added experiences for tourists and improving the efficiency of the tourism services offered by tourism firms and organizations (Gretzel, 2011; Neuhofer *et al.*, 2013). Nowadays, tourists are well-connected and well-informed, they are engaged in tourism services, and co-create value before, during and after their trip. Furthermore, tourists demand highly personalized services, engaging both socially and technologically, discussing dynamically through social media, co-creating experience, contributing to content, and utilizing their devices in multiple touch-points (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2014).

The increasing popularity of social media has revolutionized the way by which customers and service providers communicate and interact. Online reviews posted by customers and responses provided by service managers on social media sites are technology-mediated interactions that go beyond face-to-face service encounters. The rapid growth of web 2.0 applications has empowered tourists and allowed two-way information communications in travel and tourism. As a result, an enormous number of online UGC has been created on tourism services such as hotels, travel services, restaurants, and museums.

Tourists have several motives when engaging in social media and UGC. Self-centered motivations such as gaining respect and recognition, increasing social ties, augmenting one's self-esteem, maintenance and/or augmentation of social capital, enjoyment of online activity, altruistic motives (helping others and preventing people from using bad products) and achieving enhanced cooperation have been reported in the literature (Baym, 2010; Chang & Chuang, 2011; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). Moreover, active participation in a travel online community has a positive effect on the sense of belonging, which might lead to increased knowledge sharing (Qu and Lee 2011). When tourists share their experiences those include not only the attributional aspects of their holidays (e.g. prices, weather conditions, beaches and other attractions) but also their feelings and emotions, imaginations, and fantasies (Baym, 2010).

At the same time, an increasing number of tourists are using the internet for planning their travel (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). Online UGRs about travel destinations, hotels, and tourism services have become important sources of information for travelers (Pan *et al.*, 2007). Reports show that each year hundreds of millions of potential visitors (435 million monthly average unique visitors) consult online reviews (Tripadvisor.com. 2018). Specifically, an online study reported that 95 percent of tourists reading travel reviews prior to booking; leisure travelers reported reading an average of 6-7 reviews prior to booking and business travelers reported reading an average of 5 reviews; leisure travelers spend an average of 30 minutes reading reviews prior to booking a hotel and 10% of travelers spend more than one hour (Ady and Quadri-Felitti, 2015). Among potential visitors, 95 percent are affected by reviews when making their travel reservations (Travelindustrywire.com. 2007).

Tourist reviews serve two distinct roles: 1) they provide information about tourism services; and 2) they serve as recommendation platforms (Park *et al.*, 2007). Online reviews are perceived as particularly influential because they are written from a consumer's perspective and, thus, provide an opportunity for indirect experience (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). Moreover,

reviews are perceived as more credible than information provided by marketers (Smith *et al.*, 2005). Gretzel and Yoo (2008) found that reviews provided by other travelers are often perceived by readers to be more up-to-date, enjoyable, and reliable than information provided by travel service providers. Travel reviews play an important role in the trip planning process because they provide ideas, make decisions easier, add fun to the planning process and increase confidence by reducing risk and making it easier to imagine what places will be like (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008).

Travel reviews can benefit both tourism services and tourists although the existing research regarding the impact of online travel reviews on tourism services and tourists consumption patterns is still at its early stages. Vermeulen and Seegars' (2009) studied the impact of online hotel reviews on tourists in Holland. They used review valence, hotel familiarity and reviewer experience as independent variables and found that exposure to online reviews enhances both positive and negative tourists' attitude towards hotel consideration. Positive reviews actually increased tourists' attitude towards the hotels under investigation especially in less known hotels. Ye *et al.* (2011) studied the impact of online user-generated reviews on business performance using data extracted from a major online travel agency (Ctrip.com) in China. Their findings show that traveler reviews have a significant impact on online sales, with a 10 percent increase in traveler review ratings boosting online bookings by more than five percent. Additionally, variance/polarity of word-of-mouth for reviews had a negative impact on sales volumes. A 10% increase in review variance decreased sales by 2.8%. Ye *et al.* (2009) reported that hotels with higher star ratings received more online bookings, but room rates had a negative impact on the number of online bookings. In sum, their findings support that tourist online reviews have an important impact on online hotel bookings. The results of the above studies highlight the importance of online UGRs to business performance in tourism.

Due to their importance, many businesses around the world have established an online review management strategy or system. For example, online responses are highly effective for

customers who are very unsatisfied. Moreover, when a firm handles effectively customer complaints, it can turn negative online reviews into positive ones (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). For this reason, many companies have chosen or are planning to respond to feedback or guest complaints online (Levy *et al.*, 2013). Responding to customers' reviews has been considered as the first step in social media management (Gu and Ye, 2014). However, research shows that online responses reduce future satisfaction of complaining customers who observe management response to others, but do not receive responses themselves based on possible "peer induced fairness" (Ho and Su, 2009) or "interactional justice". It becomes apparent that firms have realized the importance of effectively managing online reviews by taking further initiatives beyond simply responding to them. Nowadays, businesses are developing online review management systems in order to gather customers' reviews from various social media platforms and utilize them to improve different aspects of their service operations.

### ***The Eastern European Tourism Market***

Over the last decades, Eastern Europe is going under economic, social and political transition. During the communist era, tourism was a state-controlled industry (Kreck, 1998) focused almost exclusively on inbound tourism. Tourism was perceived as "unproductive" and "inefficient) activity and therefore, of low priority (Williams and Balaz, 2000). Domestic tourism was seen as a necessary activity for the working class, known as "social tourism" (Allcock and Przeclawski, 1990). The purpose of vacation was to rejuvenate physically and mentally the working population (Allcock, 1986) and satisfy the demand for recreation (Williams and Balaz, 2000 2018), which in turn would lead to an overall development of personality, thus helping the economy and improving well-being. Domestic tourism was supported by paid vacations for workers in factory-owned guesthouses and low fares in public transportation (Kreck, 1998). For example, it has been

reported that in Czech Republic there were 15,300 beds in commercial tourist facilities and 309,900 beds in business-owned holiday centers. The state provided generous annual paid holidays ranging from three to six working weeks depending on the profession with the majority of the population enjoying four to five weeks of paid holiday (Williams and Balaz, 2000). International traveling was limited and highly controlled by the state tourism agencies while it was restricted to certain geographic areas (Ivy and Copp, 1999). Visiting other countries and cultures has been an uncommon practice in the days of Soviet rule resulting in low numbers of outbound tourism. According to Zuev (2008) independent travel abroad was a privilege of a chosen few such as prominent members of the Communist party and Komsomol leader (party youth wing). Moreover, during the Soviet period “abroad” has taken a mythological dimension in the minds of the citizens. “Borders between internal (home, Soviet Union, East) and external space (abroad, West) functioned for insiders in order to keep the monopoly of the state over the knowledge about abroad and its mythical “milk and honey” resources” (p.12). During the transition period (1990-1996) changes in tourism patterns have been identified. For example, in Slovakia and Czech Republic younger and middle age urban residents with a university education were the segments with the highest propensity to travel after the liberalization of border controls. During this time, the overall tourism participation rate decreased as a result of a significant decline in short breaks due to life-style changes and growing income inequalities. However, the proportion of people taking long holidays increased indicating an equitable distribution of holidays across the population. For example, in 1987 the propensity of Slovaks and Czechs to take longer holidays was 20.2% and 44.5% respectively whereas for EU nationals it was 56%. During transformation, the gap with EU countries diminished with Slovakia increasing its rates to 44.4% (Williams and Balaz, 2000). Thus, travelling is a relatively new consumption behavior for the citizens of Eastern European countries given that until 1989 they had limited experience in travelling abroad. Therefore, the majority of the available literature on tourism after 1990 is

confined to the development of the tourism sector in CESEE countries and to the positioning of certain destinations (Hall, 2004; Vodenska, 2018).

Another issue that CESEE countries faced during the transition period was the adoption of new technologies. According to Jakubowicz (2005) “the response of the region to the challenges of the Information Society has, in most cases, been slow and inadequate.” (p.15). Social media penetration in Eastern Europe is 45% in 2018 (Global Digital Report 2018). Statista reports that the number of people in Eastern Europe using social networking sites increased from 153.6 million in 2013 to 212.2 million in 2019 with an increasing tendency over the years (Table I). Many CESEE countries are trying to become knowledge-based economies and use the potential offered by the information society in order to be able to meet the requirements and enter the EU (Jakubowicz, 2005). Jayaram, Manrai and Manrai (2015) have proposed that three country clusters exist in Eastern Europe based on the adoption of new technologies and internet penetration rates. These clusters have been named a) high speed (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia), b) medium speed (Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia) and c) low speed (Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia).

As a result, tourism as well as social media consumption could be seen as relatively new consumption behaviors for CESEE consumers. Therefore, there is a significant lack of scientific research regarding tourism behavior, online and offline, from Eastern Europe. The majority of the available information is confined to descriptive reports. Following, all the available literature on tourism behavior in former Soviet Union Republics and Eastern Europe is presented.

According to the Eurobarometer (2014), the main reason for taking holidays varies for people from various Eastern European countries. Sun/beach is the main reason for Slovenians (66%), visiting friends/family for people from Montenegro (47%), enjoying nature for Czechs (54%), city trips are important reason for people from Lithuania (38%), Hungary (35%) and Poland (34%) while wellness/spa/health treatment was the most important reason for people from

**Table I** Internet and social media penetration in CESEE (table developed by the author based on the Global Digital Report 2018). \*data from <https://www.internetworldstats.com>

Country	Population (in million)	Internet Users (in million)	Internet penetration (%)	Social Media Users (in million)	Social Media penetration (%)	Facebook users*
Belarus	9.46	6.73	71%	4.67	49%	3.85
Bulgaria	7.06	4.66	66%	3.7	52%	3.3
Moldova	4.05	2.88	70%	1	25%	0.8
Romania	19.63	13.74	70%	10	51%	8.4
Russia	144	110	76%	67.8	47%	13.1
Ukraine	44.12	25.59	58%	13	29%	9.5
Czech Rep.	10.62	9.32	88%	5.3	50%	4.6
Hungary	9.71	7.67	79%	5.8	60%	5.3
Poland	38.14	29.75	78%	17	45%	14
Slovakia	5.45	4.52	83%	27	50%	2.4

North Macedonia (53%). In terms of the information sources most used in order to make a decision about travel plans, 72% of Latvians, 66% of Czechs and 45% of people from North Macedonia use the recommendations of friends, colleagues or relatives while it seems that tourists from Eastern European countries do not use the internet as a source of information (e.g., only 23% in Romania and 17% in North Macedonia). Personal experience is considered the most important source of information for people from North Macedonia (46%), Czech Republic (45%) and Montenegro (41%). Social media is an important source of information for 11% for Slovenians, 10% of Latvians, 5% of Bulgarians, Lithuanians, and Czechs, 4% of Slovaks, and 3% for Hungarians. The internet has been the mean with which the majority of Eastern Europeans made their holiday arrangements with the exceptions of Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia. Internet has been used by 37% in Bulgaria, 48% in Czech Republic, 29% in

Hungary, 53% in Latvia, 40% in Lithuania, 29% in Croatia, 45% in Hungary, 45% in Poland, 41% in Slovenia, 44% in Slovakia, 35% in Romania, 25% in Serbia, 21% in North Macedonia and 19% in Montenegro. People from Latvia (42%), Croatia (31%) and Montenegro (24%) prefer to make their travel arrangements through someone they know. Polish (26%) prefer to arrange their holiday over the phone while people from North Macedonia prefer booking on site. Interestingly, the study shows that Eastern European tourists complained the least comparing to other Europeans. 4% of respondents filed a formal complaint (EU average) while tourists from Eastern European countries presented lower percentages. For example, the highest percentage of complaints from Eastern European countries was from Czech Republic (3%) and the lowest from Serbia and Montenegro (1%) while people from North Macedonia did not formally complain (0%).

Fotis et al. (2012) studied social media use for travel by tourists residing in 12 former Soviet Union Republics (64.2% were coming from Russia). They analyzed how this tourists' group interacts with social media when planning a trip and found that social media are used mostly for choosing a destination than accommodation. Moreover, 65% of their sample indicated that they made some changes to their original plan as a result of other travelers' content (comments and reviews) on UGC sites. Fotis et al. (2012) support tourists residing in former Soviet Union Republics use social media predominantly after their trip, contrary to previous findings by Cox et al. (2009) who studied Australian tourists and found that they predominantly use social media before a trip for information search purposes. Fotis et al.' study showed that tourists from former USSR used social media to share their trip experiences by posting videos, photos and reviews. 78% of their sample used social media to share their experiences and photos with others while 27% engaged in providing reviews and evaluations. Regarding age, 36% were aged between 25 and 39 years old, while the over 55 years group accounted for only 12% of the sample.

Russia is Eastern Europe's largest travel market. Tourism in Russia has been increasingly growing over the last decades and Russians have become the 4th most important tourism market worldwide (UNWTO, 2015) with 39.6 million people travelling around the world in 2017 (Statista.com, 2018). According to RusIndex (Ipsos, 2018), in 2017 45% of Russian tourists visited resorts for the sea and sun, spent on average 880 Euro per person during their vacation, 66% booked their travel through a travel agency, 52% took vacation for 1.5/2 weeks and 81% stayed at hotels from which the majority were 4-stars hotels. With an internet penetration that reaches 76%% (Table I) Russian tourists are getting more involved in the use of digital platforms and specifically, 47% use social media. VK, Facebook and Odnoklassniki are the most popular social media in Russia while micro- and photoblogging sites, dominated by Twitter and Instagram respectively, have experienced rapid growth over the years. However, brochures and magazines remain the major sources of travel information and only an estimated 25% of the population actively seeks out information online. Online bookings account for only 18% of the total travel market in Russia. Women represent a small majority in social media by making up between 53% (Twitter) and 56% (Odnoklassniki) of users in major networks. Activities, whereabouts and personal views represent 20% of posts in social media while 40% are re-postings of popular news, comments and discussions. The rest of the posts concern a wide range of topics, including travel. In blogs, descriptions of actual trips and sharing photos of their day with a small comment or description are the most common activities of Russian tourists in social media (UNWTO, 2015). In terms of online travel agencies (OTAs), 70% of Russian tourists use them to gather information about hotels and 64% about flights, while only 12% rely on the hotels' websites and 46% on the airlines' websites (Phocuswright, 2015).

Criteria considered for choosing a hotel are location, followed by reviews, photos and videos and general information provided. Russian tourists consider to a great extent the reviews, evaluations, and opinions of other tourists before booking for a hotel. However, the level of

consideration they give depends on the type of lodging service (in terms of luxury), as well as if the reviews are positive or negative. Russians give a higher weight to positive online reviews (mean score of 4 for 4- and 5-star hotels in a scale 1-5) than to negative one (mean score of 2.5 for 4- and 5- star-hotels in a scale 1-5) (Kazakov and Predvoditeleva, 2015).

According to the Centre for the Promotion of Imports (CBI, 2018), the majority of Polish tourists are first-generation travelers interested in sun and beach holidays. They generally have relatively high incomes, however they are price-sensitive, choose all-inclusive sun and beach holidays in 4/5-star hotels, and often travel in couples. Because they may not always be fluent in English, they highly appreciate having information in Polish. Romanian and Slovakian tourists prefer sun and beach holidays however nature and the culture of the destination are important as well. Romanian tourists like sightseeing and excursions whereas Slovaks are interested in active or sports-related holidays. Due to their inexperience in tourism, their choice of destination they often rely on recommendations by their friends and relatives for choosing a destination. Moreover, due to the lack of money, Romanians and Slovakian tourists are very price-conscious.

## **Method**

In order to accomplish the aims of this research, a quantitative approach has been taken by studying online user-generated ratings and reviews of hotels in Greece by using Trip Advisor evaluations. Greece is on the top five of EU destinations for Europeans (Eurostat 2018) and within the top 3 for Eastern Europeans. More than 70% of inbound tourism in Greece comes from EU countries from which more than half comes from Eastern Europe. According to INSETE, in 2017, 13.6% of visitors were from Germany, 5.3% from Italy, 5.2% from France, 3.5% from the Netherlands, and 2.3% from Cyprus (total 30%). Eastern European tourists represent more than 35% of total tourist arrivals (27,194,185) in 2017 in Greece. Specifically, 9.4% of total tourists in

Greece were from Bulgaria (2,546,307), 5.8% were from North Macedonia (1,571,489), 4.2% were from Romania (1,148,944), 4% were from Serbia (1,079,879), 3% were from Albania (828,796), 2.7% were from Poland (746,759), 2.2% were from Albania (588,667), 2.2% were from Russia (588,667), and 1.2 % were from Czech Republic (339,398). Greece is very popular tourism destination for Europeans and Easter Europeans due to the geographical and cultural proximity as well as low prices.

TripAdvisor.com, the world largest and most well-known online user-generated review site within the travel industry, was the source of data for this study. “With more than 630 million reviews and opinions covering the world's largest selection of travel listings worldwide -- over 7 million accommodations, airlines, attractions, and restaurants -- TripAdvisor provides travelers with the wisdom of the crowds to help them decide where to stay, how to fly, what to do and where to eat. TripAdvisor also compares prices from more than 200 hotel booking sites so travelers can find the lowest price on the hotel that's right for them. TripAdvisor-branded sites are available in 49 markets, and are home to the world's largest travel community of 415 million average unique monthly visitors, all looking to get the most out of every trip” (Tripadvisor.com, 2018).

In this study, the overall rating and attributes of four and five star hotels in Greece were used for the analysis. Specifically, in order to examine how tourists from various European regions evaluated these hotels, their ratings on perceived value, location, sleep quality, rooms, cleanliness and service as indicated on Trip Advisor were used. In addition demographics such as age and gender as well number of reviews were analyzed.

The online reviews examined on the TripAdvisor website were 1,055 which were uploaded between October 1 and November 30, 2017. Every tourist review included the overall rating and hotel attribute ratings (value, location, sleeping quality, rooms, cleanliness, service) on a scale of 1 – 5 (1=terrible, 5=excellent).

## Results

### *Analysis of Total Sample*

The sample of the study consisted of reviews of five hotels, two five-star and three four-star hotels, in Greece. 716 (67.9%) reviews were made for the five star hotels whereas the remaining 339 (32.1%) reviews were for the four star hotels. In terms of gender, 47.1% were males and 52.9% females. In relation to age, 4.9% of the sample was 18 to 24 years, 23.3% were between 25 and 34 years old, 53.3% were between 35 and 49 years old, 16.9% were between 50-64 years old and 1.6% was older than 65 years. 64.1% stayed at the hotels with their family, 26% were with their partner, 9.9% stayed with friends. Participants of the study came from 41 different countries. Most hotel customers came from the United Kingdom (41.3%), Greece (12.1%), Russia (10.4), Germany (7.1%), Romania (4%) and Bulgaria (2.7%). The average number of reviews of the sample was 15.04 reviews ranging from 1 to 330.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results showed that there were no gender differences on the evaluation of hotels in terms of overall grade ( $F=.38$ ,  $p=.54$ ), value ( $F=.90$ ,  $p=.34$ ), location ( $F=.67$ ,  $p=.41$ ), sleeping quality ( $F=.07$ ,  $p=.80$ ), rooms ( $F=.14$ ,  $p=.71$ ), cleanliness ( $F=1.01$ ,  $p=.32$ ), and service ( $F=2.97$ ,  $p=.09$ ). Moreover, female and male customers of these hotels did not differ significantly in the number of reviews they have uploaded ( $F=.004$ ,  $p=.95$ ).

However, significant differences were found in the evaluations between four and five star hotels. Specifically, as Table II shows four and five star hotels differed in the overall grade ( $F=145.8$ ,  $p=.00$ ), value ( $F=16.9$ ,  $p=.00$ ), location ( $F=11.6$ ,  $p=.00$ ), sleeping quality ( $F=46.2$ ,  $p=.00$ ), rooms ( $F=21.3$ ,  $p=.00$ ), cleanliness ( $F=12.1$ ,  $p=.00$ ) and service ( $F=3.4$ ,  $p=.00$ ). Moreover, the average number of reviews of customers did not differ between four and five star hotels ( $F=2.3$ ,  $p=.13$ ). Four star hotels were rated lower than five star hotels in terms of overall grade and all hotel attributes: value, location, sleeping quality, rooms, cleanliness and service.

**Table II.** Hotel attributes' mean scores by hotel stars and ANOVA results

STARS	Overall Grade	Value	Location	Sleeping Quality	Rooms	Cleanlines	Service	No of Reviews
4 Stars	3.90	3.83	3.82	4.09	3.95	4.15	4.01	13.59
5 Stars	4.64	4.24	4.64	4.66	4.58	4.72	4.66	17.42
Total	4.40	4.11	4.36	4.46	4.37	3.54	4.45	16.19
ANOVA Results	F=151.2 p=.00	F=23.9 p=.00	F=155.2 p=.00	F=56.5 p=.00	F=71.6 p=.00	F=76.4 p=.00	F=96.8 p=.00	F=2.2 p=.13

In terms of the influence of age in the evaluation of the hotels' attributes, one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to uncover group differences across multiple variables in a design with one factor (age). The independent variable, age, was used to classify respondents into three age categories, 19-34 years, 35-49 years and 50-65 years old. The dependent variables were overall grade, value, location, sleeping quality, rooms, cleanliness, service, number of reviews. The null hypothesis of no differences was not rejected at the 0.05 level (Wilk's  $\Lambda=1.30$ ,  $p=0.20$ ). Thus, the overall MANOVA results show that the three age groups did not differ overall in terms of how they evaluated the hotels of the study and the number of reviews they have uploaded.

Moreover, the analysis continued by comparing the evaluations of hotel customers based on with whom they stayed at the hotel: with family members, their partner or friends. The dependent variables were overall grade, value, location, sleeping quality, rooms, cleanliness, service, number of reviews. The null hypothesis of no differences was rejected at the 0.05 level (Wilk's  $\Lambda=0.92$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). Thus, the overall MANOVA results show that the three groups differ

overall in terms of how they evaluated the hotels of the study and the number of reviews they have uploaded. The MANOVA results are presented on Table III.

**Table III.** MANOVA results for travel companionship

<b>TRAVEL WITH</b>	<b>Overall Grade</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Sleeping Quality</b>	<b>Rooms</b>	<b>Cleanliness</b>	<b>Service</b>	<b>No of Reviews</b>
Family	4.51	4.09	4.45	4.49	4.49	4.66	4.53	12.62
Partner	4.52	4.24	4.41	4.44	4.48	4.71	4.60	9.36
Friends	4.13	4.13	4.08	4.17	4.15	4.26	4.30	7.94
ANOVA results	F=3.99 p=.02	F=.99 p=.37	F=3.87 p=.02	F=2.6 p=.07	F=3.29 p=.04	F=7.13 p=.00	F=1.90 p=.15	F=1.05 p=.35
Wilk's $\Lambda$ =.92, F=2.36, p=.00								

Univariate F-tests were run for all sets of groups on the dependent variables to determine where the differences existed. Significant differences between groups were found on the dependent variables overall grade (p=.02), location (p=.02), room (p=.04), and cleaning (p=.00). To protect against family-wise error, group contrasts for all the dependent variables were tested using the Tukey procedure. Pair-wise multiple comparison tests tested each pair of age groups to identify similarities and differences. The contrasts that were significant at the 0.05 level were on overall grade between those staying at the hotels with their family members and those staying with friends (p=.02), and between staying with their partner and those being with their friends (p=.03). Regarding location, the contrast staying with family vs. staying with friends (p=.02). In terms of rooms, the contrast that was significant at the 0.05 level was between those staying at the hotels with their family members vs. those staying with friends (p=.02). Regarding cleaning, the contrasts that were significant were between the group traveling with friends and those being with their family (p=.00) and those traveling with their partner (p=.00).

### **Results by European Region**

The analysis continued by grouping the hotel customers who uploaded their reviews on the Trip Advisor website into the four groups/sub-samples based on the major regions of Europe: eastern, northern, southern and western. Based on the above mentioned grouping of countries, the northern European sample was 475 (45%), the western European sample was 127 (12%), the eastern European sample was 230 (21.8%) and the southern European Sample was 223 (21.2%). The majority of the eastern European sample came from Russia (51%) followed by Romania (20%), Bulgaria (13%) and Ukraine (6.55). The remaining of the sub-sample came from Moldavia, Belarus, Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic. Table IV provides descriptive statistics of the sample by European region and the results of chi square tests in relation to gender, age, hotels they stayed and with whom they travel.

**Table IV.** Descriptive statistics by European region (\* in parenthesis the results presented are within the same European region)

GENDER	Eastern Europe*	Northern Europe*	Southern Europe*	Western Europe*
Males	16.9% (37.7%)	49.6% (46.8%)	19.9% (49.5%)	13.6% (64%)
Females	24.9% (62.3%)	50.2% (53.2%)	18.1% (50.5%)	6.8% (36%)
$\chi^2$ for Gender by European region= 9.69 (p=.02)				
HOTELS	Eastern Europe*	Northern Europe*	Southern Europe*	Western Europe*
Four Star	34.1% (47%)	17% (11.4%)	35% (49.8%)	13.9% (34.6%)
Five Star	16.5% (53%)	57% (88.6%)	15.2% (50.2%)	11.2% (65.4%)
$\chi^2$ for Hotel Star by European region= 152.71 (p=.00)				
AGE	Eastern Europe*	Northern Europe*	Southern Europe*	Western Europe*
19-34	32.2% (42.7%)	37.5% (19.3%)	18.8% (32.3%)	12.5% (31.1%)
35-49	18.4% (48.8%)	58.1% (57.8%)	14.7% (49.2%)	8.8% (42.2%)

50-65	8.6% (8.5%)	61.7% (22.9%)	14.8% (18.5%)	14.8% (26.7%)
$\chi^2$ for Age by European region= 22.96 (p=.00)				
TRAVEL WITH	Eastern Europe*	Northern Europe*	Southern Europe*	Western Europe*
Family	20.2% (62.1%)	47.7% (67.1%)	21.9% (66.2%)	10.2% (54.4%)
Partner	20.6% (25.8%)	49.4% (28.2%)	15.8% (19.4%)	14.2% (30.7%)
Friends	26.7% (12.1%)	22.2% (4.6%)	32.2% (14.4%)	18.9% (14.9%)
$\chi^2$ for Travel with by European region= 28.49 (p=.00)				

In order to identify differences among tourists from different European regions in terms in how they evaluated hotels MANOVA was conducted. The dependent variables were overall grade, value, location, sleeping quality, rooms, cleanliness, service, number of reviews. The null hypothesis of no differences was rejected at the 0.05 level (Wilk's  $\Lambda=0.86$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). Thus, the overall MANOVA results show that the four groups differed overall in terms of how they evaluated the hotels of the study and the number of reviews they have uploaded. The MANOVA results are presented on Table V.

**Table V.** MANOVA results on overall grade and hotel attributes by European region.

EUROPEAN REGION	Overall Grade	Value	Location	Sleeping Quality	Rooms	Cleanliness	Service	No of Reviews
Eastern	4.48	4.31	4.20	4.54	4.36	4.63	4.54	15.40
Northern	4.64	4.21	4.52	4.61	4.68	4.78	4.70	12.44
South	4.07	3.83	4.35	4.16	4.14	4.38	4.15	11.20
Western	4.48	4.12	4.40	4.25	4.27	4.50	4.43	6.25
Wilk's $\Lambda =.82$ , $F=3.7$ , $p=.00$								

Univariate F-tests were run for all sets of groups on the dependent variables to determine where the differences existed. Significant differences between groups on the overall grade ( $F=8.37, p=.00$ ) and service attributes such as value ( $F=4.39, p=.00$ ), location ( $F=2.91, p=.03$ ), sleeping quality ( $F=6.52, p=.00$ ), rooms ( $F=9.90, p=.00$ ), cleaning ( $F=6.73, p=.00$ ), and service ( $F=7.82, p=.00$ ) were found. No differences among regions were detected on the number of reviews ( $F=1.27, p=.29$ ).

To protect against family-wise error, group contrasts for all the dependent variables were tested using the Tukey procedure. Pair-wise multiple comparison tests tested each pair of regional groups to identify similarities and differences. Eighteen contrasts between groups were found to be significant at the .05 level (Table VI). Contrasts were significant on overall grade between eastern European tourists and southern European tourists ( $p=.00$ ), between northern European tourists and southern European tourists ( $p=.00$ ), and between southern Europeans and western Europeans ( $p=.01$ ). Moreover, two contrasts, northern European tourists vs. southern European tourists, and eastern Europeans vs. southern Europeans on value were significant ( $p=.00$ ). Regarding location, evaluations between eastern Europeans and northern Europeans were significantly different ( $p=.00$ ). In terms of sleeping quality, the contrasts that were significant were eastern Europeans vs. southern Europeans ( $p=.00$ ), northern Europeans vs. western Europeans ( $p=.01$ ) and northern Europeans vs. southern Europeans ( $p=.00$ ). Regarding room evaluations, the contrasts that were significant were eastern European tourists vs. northern European tourists ( $p=.00$ ), northern Europeans vs. southern Europeans ( $p=.00$ ), and northern Europeans vs. western Europeans ( $p=.00$ ). Three contrasts were also significant on cleaning, northern Europeans vs. southern Europeans ( $p=.00$ ), northern Europeans vs. western Europeans ( $p=.01$ ) and southern Europeans and eastern Europeans ( $p=.02$ ). Finally, two contrasts were significant on service, eastern Europeans vs. southern Europeans ( $p=.00$ ) and northern Europeans vs. southern Europeans ( $p=.00$ ).

Table VI. Pairwise comparisons across regions on hotel attributes

Dependent Variable	(I) EuRegions	(J) EuRegions	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. <sup>b</sup>	95% Confidence Interval for Difference <sup>b</sup>	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
OVERALL GRADE	Eastern EU	Northern EU	-.156	.110	.157	-.372	.060
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.406*</b>	<b>.128</b>	<b>.002</b>	.153	.658
		Western EU	-.003	.146	.982	-.290	.284
	Northern EU	Eastern EU	.156	.110	.157	-.060	.372
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.561*</b>	<b>.112</b>	<b>.000</b>	.341	.782
		Western EU	.153	.132	.248	-.107	.412
	Southern EU	Eastern EU	<b>-.406*</b>	<b>.128</b>	<b>.002</b>	-.658	-.153
		<b>Northern EU</b>	<b>-.561*</b>	<b>.112</b>	<b>.000</b>	-.782	-.341
		<b>Western EU</b>	<b>-.409*</b>	<b>.148</b>	<b>.006</b>	-.699	-.119
	Western EU	Eastern EU	.003	.146	.982	-.284	.290
		Northern EU	-.153	.132	.248	-.412	.107
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.409*</b>	<b>.148</b>	<b>.006</b>	.119	.699
VALUE	Eastern EU	Northern EU	.105	.121	.388	-.133	.343
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.480*</b>	<b>.142</b>	<b>.001</b>	.202	.759
		Western EU	.193	.161	.231	-.123	.510
	Northern EU	Eastern EU	-.105	.121	.388	-.343	.133
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.375*</b>	<b>.124</b>	<b>.003</b>	.132	.619
		Western EU	.088	.146	.544	-.198	.375
	Southern EU	Eastern EU	<b>-.480*</b>	<b>.142</b>	<b>.001</b>	-.759	-.202
		<b>Northern EU</b>	<b>-.375*</b>	<b>.124</b>	<b>.003</b>	-.619	-.132
		Western EU	-.287	.163	.079	-.607	.033
	Western EU	Eastern EU	-.193	.161	.231	-.510	.123
		Northern EU	-.088	.146	.544	-.375	.198
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.287</b>	<b>.163</b>	<b>.079</b>	-.033	.607
LOCATION	Eastern EU	<b>Northern EU</b>	<b>-.323*</b>	<b>.111</b>	<b>.004</b>	-.542	-.104
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>-.151</b>	<b>.130</b>	<b>.246</b>	-.407	.104
		Western EU	-.200	.148	.177	-.490	.090
	Northern EU	<b>Eastern EU</b>	<b>.323*</b>	<b>.111</b>	<b>.004</b>	.104	.542
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.172</b>	<b>.114</b>	<b>.131</b>	-.051	.395
		Western EU	.123	.134	.357	-.139	.386
	Southern EU	Eastern EU	.151	.130	.246	-.104	.407
		<b>Northern EU</b>	<b>-.172</b>	<b>.114</b>	<b>.131</b>	-.395	.051
		Western EU	-.049	.150	.744	-.343	.245
	Western EU	Eastern EU	.200	.148	.177	-.090	.490
		Northern EU	-.123	.134	.357	-.386	.139
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.049</b>	<b>.150</b>	<b>.744</b>	-.245	.343

SLEEPING QUALITY	Eastern EU	Northern EU	-.070	.112	.530	-.290	.149
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.380*</b>	<b>.130</b>	<b>.004</b>	.124	.637
		Western EU	.290	.148	.051	-.001	.581
	Northern EU	Eastern EU	.070	.112	.530	-.149	.290
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.451*</b>	<b>.114</b>	<b>.000</b>	.227	.675
		<b>Western EU</b>	<b>.360*</b>	<b>.134</b>	<b>.007</b>	.097	.624
	Southern EU	<b>Eastern EU</b>	<b>-.380*</b>	<b>.130</b>	<b>.004</b>	-.637	-.124
		<b>Northern EU</b>	<b>-.451*</b>	<b>.114</b>	<b>.000</b>	-.675	-.227
		Western EU	-.090	.150	.547	-.385	.205
	Western EU	Eastern EU	-.290	.148	.051	-.581	.001
		<b>Northern EU</b>	<b>-.360*</b>	<b>.134</b>	<b>.007</b>	-.624	-.097
		Southern EU	.090	.150	.547	-.205	.385
ROOMS	Eastern EU	<b>Northern EU</b>	<b>-.322*</b>	<b>.107</b>	<b>.003</b>	-.532	-.112
		Southern EU	.222	.125	.077	-.024	.467
		Western EU	.093	.142	.511	-.186	.372
	Northern EU	<b>Eastern EU</b>	<b>.322*</b>	<b>.107</b>	<b>.003</b>	.112	.532
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.544*</b>	<b>.109</b>	<b>.000</b>	.329	.758
		<b>Western EU</b>	<b>.415*</b>	<b>.128</b>	<b>.001</b>	.163	.668
	Southern EU	<b>Eastern EU</b>	<b>-.222</b>	<b>.125</b>	<b>.077</b>	-.467	.024
		<b>Northern EU</b>	<b>-.544*</b>	<b>.109</b>	<b>.000</b>	-.758	-.329
		Western EU	-.128	.144	.372	-.411	.154
	Western EU	Eastern EU	-.093	.142	.511	-.372	.186
		<b>Northern EU</b>	<b>-.415*</b>	<b>.128</b>	<b>.001</b>	-.668	-.163
		Southern EU	.128	.144	.372	-.154	.411
CLEANING	Eastern EU	Northern EU	-.155	.092	.095	-.336	.027
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.247*</b>	<b>.108</b>	<b>.023</b>	.035	.459
		Western EU	.130	.123	.290	-.111	.371
	Northern EU	Eastern EU	.155	.092	.095	-.027	.336
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.402*</b>	<b>.094</b>	<b>.000</b>	.216	.587
		<b>Western EU</b>	<b>.285*</b>	<b>.111</b>	<b>.011</b>	.067	.503
	Southern EU	<b>Eastern EU</b>	<b>-.247*</b>	<b>.108</b>	<b>.023</b>	-.459	-.035
		<b>Northern EU</b>	<b>-.402*</b>	<b>.094</b>	<b>.000</b>	-.587	-.216
		Western EU	-.117	.124	.347	-.361	.127
	Western EU	Eastern EU	-.130	.123	.290	-.371	.111
		<b>Northern EU</b>	<b>-.285*</b>	<b>.111</b>	<b>.011</b>	-.503	-.067
		Southern EU	.117	.124	.347	-.127	.361
SERVICE	Eastern EU	Northern EU	-.157	.112	.161	-.378	.063
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.391*</b>	<b>.131</b>	<b>.003</b>	.133	.649
		Western EU	.107	.149	.475	-.186	.400
	Northern EU	Eastern EU	.157	.112	.161	-.063	.378
		<b>Southern EU</b>	<b>.548*</b>	<b>.115</b>	<b>.000</b>	.323	.774
		Western EU	.264	.135	.051	-.001	.529

	Southern EU	Eastern EU	-.391*	.131	.003	-.649	-.133
		Northern EU	-.548*	.115	.000	-.774	-.323
		Western EU	-.284	.151	.060	-.581	.012
	Western EU	Eastern EU	-.107	.149	.475	-.400	.186
		Northern EU	-.264	.135	.051	-.529	.001
		Southern EU	.284	.151	.060	-.012	.581
NUMBER OF REVIEWS	Eastern EU	Northern EU	2.964	3.593	.410	-4.096	10.025
		Southern EU	4.198	4.196	.318	-4.049	12.445
		Western EU	9.150	4.770	.056	-.224	18.524
	Northern EU	Eastern EU	-2.964	3.593	.410	-	4.096
		Southern EU	1.234	3.668	.737	-5.974	8.442
		Western EU	6.186	4.312	.152	-2.289	14.661
	Southern EU	Eastern EU	-4.198	4.196	.318	-	4.049
		Northern EU	-1.234	3.668	.737	-8.442	5.974
		Western EU	4.952	4.827	.305	-4.533	14.438
	Western EU	Eastern EU	-9.150	4.770	.056	-	.224
		Northern EU	-6.186	4.312	.152	-	2.289
		Southern EU	-4.952	4.827	.305	-	4.533

Based on estimated marginal means

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

## Discussion of Findings

Despite the significant growth of services in the international trade arena, cross-cultural research in services is relatively new. Cross-cultural research has a tremendous potential for providing a deep understanding of the differences and similarities across cultures in services marketing.

Cross-cultural service research can shed light on consumers' service experiences throughout the service delivery and consumption process (before purchase, during consumption, and after the

service consumption) across cultures, national or regional. This study signifies the importance of cross-cultural research in services and provides useful insights regarding the final stage of service consumption and specifically, how customers evaluate services online across different cultural regions. Specifically, the results of the study confirm to a certain degree previous research (Donrhu and Yoo, 1998; Malhotra et al., 2005; Witkowski and Wolfnberger, 2002; Zhang, Beatty and Walsh, 2008) indicating that customers from collectivistic cultures with low socioeconomic and less developed service environments and high in power distance tend to have lower service quality expectations and therefore, being more generous in their service evaluations. Most importantly, the findings show that these variations hold not only at the national level (national cultures) as they have been found previously but also at the supranational level (cultural clusters of countries). Consumers in different cultures evaluate and perceive service quality differently. Geographical, cultural, historical and economic proximity as in the case of Eastern Europe studied here seem to influence consumers' perceptions, expectations and evaluations of services. Thus, the study suggests that instead of studying national cultures, it might be also beneficial to study cultural clusters of countries based on cultural proximity in gaining a better understanding of consumers' behavior in services. Moreover, the findings of the study fill in a significant gap in the services marketing literature regarding online consumer behavior from a cross-cultural perspective. That's it, previous service research gathered data on consumers' service evaluations offline and to the author's knowledge this is the first study collecting and analyzing cross-cultural data online. Thus, the study extends cross-cultural service research methodologically and suggests that cross-cultural variations and similarities can be identified on the online environment as well. Therefore, cross-cultural online research is also appropriate in services.

In addition, the study verifies the theoretical relevance of Hofstede's framework, justifies the use of its dimensions, and its application not only at the national level as it has been initially proposed but at the supranational/regional level as well. The findings confirm Beugelsdijk et al.'s

(2017) argument that “exploring supra-national cultural zones as a level of analysis can be equally useful” (p 35). Thus, cultural proximity might also be used as a proxy for culture and could be used in cross-cultural research for identifying similarities/differences in consumer behavior and specifically in tourist behavior. The dimensions of Hofstede’s model, named power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism – collectivism, masculinity – femininity, and future orientation enhance our understanding of regional cultures and their role on consumer behavior. It becomes evidenced once again, that Hofstede’s framework is simple, practical and useful in cross-cultural studies. As a result of cultural value similarities between the countries in the regional clusters, similar dynamics were found in relation to hotel evaluations. Moreover, the study confirms the existence of cultural profiles at the supra-national level and supports the notion proposed by Taras et al. (2016) that cultural context mostly differs and changes between regions and less between countries. Thus, the study shows the potential of a supranational/regional perspective in exploring cultural influences in consumer behavior and specifically in tourism behavior. However, supranational approaches will require careful choice of the parameters in developing country clusters because they might impact empirical findings (Flores et al., 2013). Finally, the findings suggest that Hofstede’s model is still relevant not only in the offline but also at the online environment in capturing consumer behavior differences across cultural clusters. Regional cultures and their values affect tourism behavior not only offline but also online. Although it will expected that the “web” is a more globalized world embracing common behaviors, the study shows that cultural proximity plays a significant role in online tourist behavior while regional distinctive cultural clusters exist.

The tourism industry is by virtue cross-cultural. Research on cross-cultural tourism behavior has emerged as an important topic due to globalization of the tourism industry and digitalization to a large degree of tourism services. The available literature indicates that tourist behavior is not only conditioned by demographics and psychographics but also by culture either

at the national or regional level. With the growth of the internet and web 2.0, online UGC and especially UGRs on tourism services have boomed over the years producing a large amount of online information and feedback from tourists all over the world. However, research on the role of culture on shaping online tourist behavior and evaluation of tourism services is still on its infancy. The study aimed to draw the profile of tourists based on their online evaluations of hotel attributes and to identify similarities/differences among tourists from various regions of Europe in their online evaluations of hotels on Trip Advisor. Whereas most of the studies on tourism and online tourism behavior focus on Western and Asian countries, there is a significant gap in the literature on Eastern European transition countries. Therefore, the focus of the study analysis was on Eastern European tourists and therefore, its findings provide valuable insights.

The findings suggest that there are cross-cultural differences in the online evaluations of hotel attributes among tourists from different European regions. Specifically, the analysis of the total sample shows that female and male hotel customers did not differ significantly in their overall and attribute evaluations of hotels. However, the overall and attribute evaluations differ between four and five star hotels with the latter receiving higher scores. Furthermore, no age differences were found on the overall and attribute evaluations of the hotels under investigation. This finding is in line with the findings of Hsue, Woodside and Marshall (2013) who also found that cultural influences do not differ substantially by age due to the old roots and slow changes in culture. However, differences were found on the evaluations of the location, rooms and cleanliness of the hotels between those staying with their family or with their partners and with their friends. Those staying with friends evaluated significantly lower the hotels in overall grading, location, rooms and cleanliness than those staying with their families. Moreover, the same group gave lower evaluation in overall grading and cleanliness than those staying with their partners. This finding could be attributed to the differences found among tourist segments. Probably those staying with friends have different needs and goals for traveling and taking

vacation from those traveling with their families or partners. For example, a recent study by Agoda (2018) indicated that the top five considerations when booking family travel are cost, safety of the accommodation, attractions and activities, facilities and distance to destination. Thus, this group might not have been satisfied with the various hotel attributes because those have been designed for families or couples.

The results of the present work enlarge the scope of cross cultural research in tourism and generated some interesting insights regarding cross cultural differences at the supra-national level. The analysis of the regional samples shows that Eastern Europeans provided more reviews (average reviews: 15.4) than tourists from Northern (average reviews: 12.4), Southern (average reviews: 11.2), and Western Europe (average reviews: average reviews: 6.3). This finding can be explained by the high percentage of Eastern European tourists using social media in the post-trip stage and exhibiting high level of engagement with social media (comScore, 2010). This result is in line with Fotis et al., (2012) study that examined social media behavior of tourists from Russia and other former Soviet Union countries and found post-trip online behavior to be the highest in their sample. Another explanation is the very nature of the Eastern European culture that is considered as a low individualist/high collectivist and low uncertainty culture (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Collectivist cultures are characterized by interdependence of their members who sacrifice their self-interests for the sake of achieving collective goals (Hofstede, 1980). Tourists from collectivist cultures place a lot of value on belonging to their in-groups and, as a result, they tend to value interdependence and relational harmony (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Uncertainty avoidance cultures are uncomfortable with uncertainties and avoid ill-structured situations (Hofstede, 1980). In other words, Eastern European tourists engage more in post-trip behavior by uploading more reviews in social media in order to reduce risk perceptions and assist other tourists in making the right purchase decision. Given that most people from Eastern Europe are considered inexperienced tourists, UGRs could assist them in reducing their perceptions of risk and in

gathering information about hotels especially if their friends and family (the most trusted source of information for them) have not any experience from these entities. Thus, collectivism influences benevolent online sharing, defined as information sharing on social media to benefit others as previous studies indicate (Fotis et al., 2012). In sum, it is supported that cultural orientation and as a result differences may influence the extent that tourists engage on online evaluations and therefore, cross-cultural differences explain variations in online behavior.

In terms of gender within each region, more females from Eastern (62.3%), Northern (50.2%) and Southern Europe (50.5%) evaluated hotels than males whereas more males from Western Europe (64%) rated hotels. Given the composition of the Eastern European region, the findings justify the low masculinity cultures of the countries in this sub-sample as shown on Figure 1. Masculine cultures embrace values such as competition, success, and performance, whereas feminine cultures emphasize values such as social relationships and quality of life (Hofstede, 1980).

In relation to hotels they stayed, the majority of Northern Europeans (57%) stayed at a five star hotel whereas Eastern (34.1%), Southern (35%) and Western Europeans (13.9%) stayed at a four star hotel. This finding is reasonable considered the low economic power of each region, especially of tourists coming from Eastern Europe, comparing to Northern Europeans. However, when examining the results within region, it seems that the majority of Eastern Europeans are staying in five star hotels (53%) indicating that the wealthiest tourists from this region are traveling abroad and they can afford high quality services. Recent reports indicate that the spending power of Russian tourists increased on average by 36.5% in 2017 comparing to 2016, with an average spending of 1,000 euro (Tretyak, 2017).

In addition, Northern Europeans stay at hotels mostly with their partners (49.4%) or family (47.4%). Southern Europeans mostly stayed with their friends (32.2%) comparing to Eastern (26.7%), Northern (22.2%) and Western Europeans (18.9%). The majority of Eastern

Europeans (62.1%) stayed at the hotel with their family followed by those staying with their partners (25.8%) and with friends (12.1%). This finding is in line with previous research by Muchosol (2016) that shows Russian tourists mainly travel with their families (68%) or other families (24%) and only 8% with friends. Traveling with other people and in groups is another reflection of their collectivist and uncertainty avoidance culture.

Regarding their evaluations, the four groups differed significantly and specifically in overall grade, value, location, sleeping quality, rooms, cleanliness, and service. Northern European evaluated higher the hotels overall (mean=4.64) and its attributes such as location (mean=4.52), sleeping quality (mean=4.61), rooms (mean=4.68), cleanliness (mean=4.78), and service (mean=4.70) indicating that they are more satisfied, evaluate more positively, and they are more generous. However, these results could be also attributed to the fact that the majority of them stayed in five star hotels receiving high quality service.

The second highest evaluations were made by Eastern Europeans. Specifically, they evaluated higher the value of the hotels (mean=4.31), comparing to other Europeans (Northern Europeans=4.21, Southern Europeans=3.83) and Western Europeans=4.12) whereas they gave the second highest score (after Northern Europeans) in sleeping quality (4.54), rooms (4.36), cleanliness (4.63) and service (4.54). These results could be attributed to the purpose of their reviews (to assist others) and to their lack of tourism experience. As previously presented, Eastern Europeans make more evaluations for helping other tourists in finding the right hotel. In other words their motives for uploading reviews are more humanitarian and not for taking revenge or punish a hotel. Therefore, they focus on making positive reviews than negative. Moreover, complaining behavior in Eastern Europe is seen as annoying and therefore, eastern Europeans avoid complaining to service firms (Eurobarometer, 2014; Usunier and Lee, 2005). This finding is also in line with the cultural service personality framework proposed by Zhang, Beatty and Walsh (2008) which suggests that eastern/collectivistic cultures have lower overall

expectations of service quality, and therefore they are more satisfied, are less likely to complain in a service failure and have less aggressive reactions, they are more focused on intangible cues from the environment and on social benefits in a customer service provider relationship. Moreover, due to their limited tourism experience they might not have many points of references to compare with.

Interestingly, Southern Europeans gave the lowest scores overall grade (mean=4.07) and in most attributes such as value (mean=3.83), sleeping quality (mean=4.16), rooms (mean=4.14), cleanliness (mean=4.38) and service (mean=4.15) except location (mean=4.35). It seems that Southern Europeans have higher expectations and are stricter in their evaluation of hotels comparing to other Europeans.

In sum, European tourists from various regions evaluated differently the hotels and their attributes indicating that cultural differences exist in online tourism reviews. These findings confirm the conceptual approach of the study to use cultural proximity in identifying similarities/differences in tourism evaluations among different cultural clusters. As Doty and Glink (1994) support cultural clustering provides an empirical classification of cultural types that goes beyond tentative and existing clustering sets that are limited in scope and depth, and lack key information regarding similarity levels and cohesiveness. As such, cultural clustering supplies important inputs to tourism services research relevant for theory development and practical implications.

### ***Practical Implications***

The challenge of services marketers is how to realize and appreciate cultural variations and communalities and how to translate this understanding into effective service delivery processes, interactions, and communications. This study sheds light on the final stage of the service delivery process and provides several practical implications to both, service and tourism managers.

It is apparent that cultural differences will have a range of implications including service offering development, market segmentation, and promotion. First, the results of the study could be used for segmentation purposes of the European tourism market. Armed with this information on the characteristics of each regional culture, tourism managers could target culturally homogenous tourism clusters in order to create an atmosphere of familiarity and understanding. This would help to increase the quality of tourism offerings, further the satisfaction levels of tourists, and reduce company's costs. In addition, awareness of cultural clusters differences would help tourism managers to position their offerings effectively. For example, tourists from Eastern European countries have different characteristics and behaviors than tourists from other European regions. In the past, travelling abroad was limited in Eastern European countries for political and/or financial reasons. Nowadays, the economic borders are open, the income of their citizens increases while their economies in combination with their outbound travel signify above average growth. This drives the emergence of Eastern European countries as promising tourism source markets. The study findings show that Eastern Europeans are easier to serve and please than tourists from Southern and Western Europe, so they should become a priority target segment. Thus, hotels aiming to target this group of tourists should position themselves accordingly by improving certain aspects of their services (e.g. surroundings of location) as the findings of the study indicate.

Second, managers could gain an understanding of the post trip behavior of their customers on social media. Specifically, hotel managers could benefit from the high level of post-trip engagement of their Eastern and Northern European customers and use their testimonials in their offline and online marketing campaigns. Moreover, they could turn these "experienced reviewers" into "influencers" and "advocates" to promote their businesses. In the emerging Eastern European markets, online travel platforms are becoming increasingly important travel information and sales channels. Tourists from these countries are becoming digitally confident,

leading them to use social media as sources for information and inspiration to plan and book their holidays online. Therefore, hotel managers should encourage the customers from this European region to perform reviews and upload them on social media. Moreover, managers should respond accordingly to customers' reviews from Eastern Europe keeping in mind that they are made on good faith and for the sole purpose of assisting other customers to make the best choice.

Third, managers could benefit from the findings of the study by recognizing which aspects of their services need to be improved based on the segment they serve. Thus, the study could assist hotel managers to customize to a certain degree their service offerings based on the aspects that seem to be valued most from their customers or to develop new services that will satisfy this segment. For example, in order to increase customer satisfaction from Eastern European countries that use mostly environmental cues to evaluate service offerings (Mattila, 1999a), managers need to improve their rooms and service as well as the sleeping quality of their hotels.

Fourth, the findings also suggest that promotion and advertising campaigns in the four European regions are likely to be more effective when considering knowledge of cultural differences. In this vein, creating awareness about tourism offerings and attracting homogeneous groups of tourists would be more effective. For example, since Eastern Europeans are travelling usually with family and partners and location is an important aspect of hotels, managers should use communication material (online and offline advertising) that shows the location of the hotel as well as people in families or couples staying on their hotels. Thus, Eastern Europeans could identify with the customers shown on the ads while taking a sense of the hotel location.

The results suggest that hotel managers and marketers should be concerned about the influence of cultural factors on tourist behavior not only offline but also online. Cultural differences should be taken into account in how to interpret tourists' evaluations of hotels, online responses should be adjusted based on the cultural background of tourists, and service

improvements should be made based on the culture of their target customers. In sum, the findings of the study could improve the online review management systems of hotels and other tourism and travel services present on TripAdvisor such as restaurants, airlines, museums and event organizers by indicating another parameter that should be taken into account such as cross cultural variations at the supra-national level.

In addition, the findings of the study could benefit managers of other products and services. Understanding the relationship between a consumer's culture and the extent that they engage in online behavior such as online reviews will help managers develop effective strategies for targeting global online consumers and better predict and facilitate the sharing of information about their products and services. The growing popularity of UGRs influences a wide range of marketing activities because it transfers information control from companies to consumers. Monitoring and analyzing UGRs is essential to today's managers however to do so effectively companies need to consider cultural variations at the supra-national level. Thus, companies need to develop their online skills and competences and invest in new marketing concepts.

### **Limitations and Future Research Recommendations**

This study is limited to tourists from the four European regions visiting Greece and to the hotels studied. Given the increasing significance of cross-cultural similarities and differences, further research is required in order to better understand the cross cultural differences and the impact of cultural proximity at the supra-national level on tourism behavior. It is clear that the results of the current study and future studies should be taken into account for creating better tourism experiences. In this vein, the same regions could be studied in various destinations in Greece and in other countries after having different tourism experiences. Further studies are also needed for understanding the effects of cultural proximity at the supra-national level on other aspects of tourist behavior such as motivation, preferred activities, satisfaction, and loyalty. Another

limitation of the study is its subjects being the customers of hotels willing to upload a review and evaluate hotels. This necessitates further research on evaluations of other services suppliers such as tour operators, airlines, restaurants, museums etc. Such studies may help us to create a comprehensive understanding of cross cultural online tourism behavior. The dataset used for analysis comprised only 5 hotels in Northern Greece. A large sample from various hotels in Greece and other international tourism destinations could verify the results of the study. Furthermore, the analysis is based only on the grades and not on the comments following each evaluation. Future research should also provide information about the comments of the tourists via text analysis. Moreover, this study is limited to identify similarities/differences on post-trip behavior across the four European regions. Future, studies should attempt to find cultural similarities/differences throughout the trip planning process. Online tourism behavior before, during and after a trip will provide a more comprehensive picture of tourists from the four European regions. Finally, the scarcity of research on Eastern Europe requires more studies focused on these emerging markets and tourism behavior online and offline as well.

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