

The Visit England Grading Scheme: An investigation into its effectiveness

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1.0 Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of the Visit England grading scheme, with considerations as to whether it is becoming outdated in the hotel selection process due to increasing use of CIT. The objectives of the paper are to investigate the scheme; its classifications and the history behind it, to examine alternative methods of hotel selection and come to a conclusion of whether the scheme can work alongside these methods as a complimentary process or whether the scheme will become outdated in favour of the alternative online methods. The paper offers recommendations for Visit England, for guests and for hoteliers on how to manage the two methods.

The literature review begins by discussing the underlying issue of customer satisfaction and measurement; considering Heskett et al's (2008) service-profit chain, the importance and benefits of benchmarking, (Rimmington and Kozak (1998), and Smith et al (1993)) before focusing on its role within the hospitality industry. It goes on to discuss the history and classifications of Visit England and the findings from studies into which aspects need to be included within a hotel grading scheme. Also included is literature on alternative methods of selection, involving an article by Sylt (2009) which argues that the scheme has become eroded by technology.

The paper gathers information using a questionnaire, distributed using a stratified sample of 120 people. Two semi structured interviews were then carried out to further investigate areas of interest. From this research there is a clear indication of online methods being the favoured hotel selection process across the age groups, with only 21 people answering that they are aware of the Visit England grading scheme, and only 12 people answering that they would be put off by a hotel not having a Visit England classification. Findings show that hotel selection is often carried out by the use of a search engine which then directs people to the hotel's own website, as well as the younger participant visiting trip advisor.

The paper comes to the conclusion that the two methods can complement each other, however important recommendations are made to Visit England to publicise the scheme and make it more widely known. The paper also gives recommendations for the hotels that are part of the Visit England scheme, advising that the rating can be used as a marketing tool, however online alternatives cannot be ignored. Hotels that are not part of the Visit England grading scheme need to have alternative successful online methods in place to fully market their hotel.

1.1 Key Words

Hotel Grading Schemes
Visit England
Guest satisfaction in hotels
Online hotel reviews
Hotel Benchmarking

2.0 Context, Aim & Objectives

2.1 Context

Throughout the world hotel grading schemes are in place in order to establish a hierarchy of quality, often based upon facilities that the establishment has to offer. In the past such systems as the AA & RAC were the only way of determining the standard of hotel that you were choosing, however since the technology generation has swept in there are many alternatives to the grading schemes of the past. Many hotels have their own websites hosting reviews and testimonials left by past guests and the facility to check availability or make online bookings directly with the hotel, as well as interactive review websites such as trip advisor, making information and booking facilities readily available to all who wish to access it.

The study tests the Null Hypothesis of “More people are using alternative ways of finding hotels than those using the star rating systems.”

With an Alternative Hypothesis of “The star rating system is still widely used, either as a main tool within hotel selection or alongside the more modern alternatives”

2.2 Aim

This research paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the Visit England hotel grading scheme now that computer information technology plays a part in hotel selection and reviewing. Concluding as to whether the Visit England hotel grading scheme will one day be cast aside to favour the more modern approach or whether the two methods can coincide.

2.3 Objectives

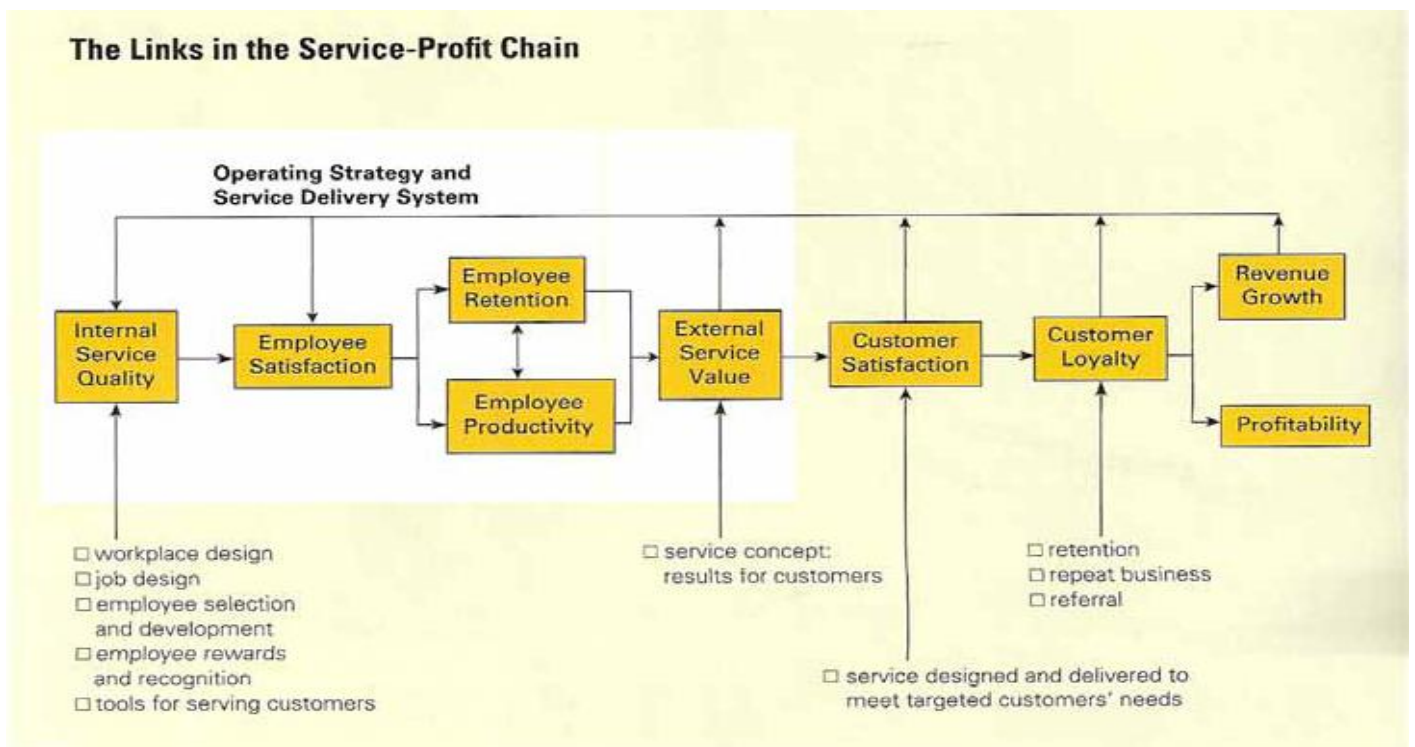
- To investigate the Visit England Grading scheme and establish the standards and expectations of its classifications
- To investigate alternative methods of choosing a place to stay and reasons for using them
- To draw conclusion on the role of the Visit England hotel grading scheme with relation to the alternative methods
- To offer suggestions on managing the different selection methods for hoteliers
- To offer recommendations to hotel guests on the hotel selection process
- To offer recommendations to Visit England

3.0 Instrumental Literature Review

Visit England and other hotel grading schemes are based upon the underlying issue of quality and customer satisfaction management. This is an important issue and a lot of research has been done into its importance and how it can be achieved and measured.

The ‘service-profit chain’ shows the link between profitability, customer loyalty, and productivity. *Heskett et al (2008 p120)* explains the chain as the process of “Enhancing internal service quality to raise employee satisfaction, fuelling employee loyalty and productivity, boosting external service value – which then increases customer satisfaction and loyalty” This is shown in figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 The Links in the service profit chain



Source: Heskett et al 2008 (p120)

The most important step for the purpose of this research is customer satisfaction, as shown, the way to satisfy a customer is to meet and exceed their needs. *Alexander and Hall (2006)* discuss the concept of a customer value package (CVP), which is described as “the combined set of benefits provided by the supplier to the customer”; if the CVP meets the customers’ needs they will be satisfied and more likely be become loyal. Despite this process seeming simple, the difficulty lies in deciding what makes up the CVP as customers needs cannot be easily defined and are different depending on the individual – particularly within the service industry where perceptions and experiences are ever-changing.

This leads to the issue of how to measure customer satisfaction in a way that will meet everyone’s needs, which is the underlying flaw with hotel grading schemes; this is an issue which will be addressed later on in the report.

Table 3.1 The objectives of a customer satisfaction measurement program

Issue to address:	What needs to be done:
Customer Requirements	Identify the requirements then attach an importance rating to each of them
Customer Satisfaction	Identify the level of satisfaction with each of the previous requirements
Comparisons with other companies	Compare the requirements and the satisfaction levels with your competitors
Priorities for improvement	Evaluate the outcome of the above and decide on how you can reflect on these points to improve yourselves
Customer Satisfaction index	Use the information gained to create an index of the customer satisfaction factors
Create a trackable measure of satisfaction	Using the index to create a way of tracking customer satisfaction, which can be used continuously

Source: Alexander and Hall (2003)

The measurement of customer satisfaction begins with identifying the requirements needed to make the customer satisfied and the importance of each one. *Johnson & Gustafsson (2000)* argue that customers and suppliers see through different lenses. The supplier sees through the 'organisational lens' and focuses on the products they supply, the people providing them and the processes used to deliver them. However in order to understand customer satisfaction you have to look through the 'customer lens'; "evaluating the supplier on whether they have received the results, outcomes and benefits they were seeking" (*Johnson & Gustafsson 2000*). This shows that delivering the process is not enough; you have to anticipate the customer's needs and meet them, so that they leave satisfied. (*Kotler et al 2003*) The customer lens approach gives a company somewhere to begin however it still remains open to criticism of individual preferences; not all customers 'look through the same lens'.

Alexander & Hall's next step was 'comparisons with other companies', backed by *Pyo (2001)* who states "information on competitors and the industry are the key ingredients to customer satisfaction measurement programs". He argues the whole point of measuring customer satisfaction is to benchmark in order to become leaders in the field. *Zairi (1992)* created four categories within benchmarking; internal, external, generic and functional. The category that we are most concerned with is external. This "involves comparison with competitors or peers operating within the same industry" (*Rimington & Kozak 1998, and Karlof & Ostblom 1994*)

Smith et al. (1993) show the benefits of benchmarking as:

- showing an organisation how to better meet customer needs
- identifying an organisation's strengths and weaknesses
- stimulating continuous operational improvement
- finding cost-effective ways of collecting innovative ideas

It is clear that businesses need to benchmark and consider competitors however as shown by *Rimington and Kozak (1998)* "grading schemes have a limited life and are time sensitive". Due to constantly changing customer needs grading and benchmarking is an area that needs continuous monitoring and assessment.

After discussing the reasons behind customer satisfaction measurement we will focus on its role within hospitality. As the hospitality industry is a customer centric business perceptions are gained through service and guest impressions and are easily comparable between companies. Therefore

it is essential for a company to monitor guest satisfaction as it is the image of the company, *Taylor (2008)* states hoteliers need to “understand the motivators and expectations of their target audiences and recognise that hotel experiences have both tangible and intangible elements”. This links with *Alexander and Halls CVP*; providing a package for guests made up from their expectations and needs. (*Slater 1997*).

Irons (2004) explains the discontinuity theory of “guests see the service as a continuum punctuated by significant events or key points” he calls these significant events “discontinuities of importance”. These discontinuities should therefore be incorporated into Grading schemes as these are the things that matter most to the guests, however many of these factors are tangible and experience-based making it unable to recreate them; creating a flaw.

Taylor (2008) examined the importance levels of hotel attributes with significance to satisfaction, the study measured 18 attributes and found that friendly and efficient check in, restaurant & bar facilities and onsite parking were ranked within the top 3. This contrasts with studies such as *Barsky and Labagh (1992)* which states “location, room quality, price and hotel facilities are ranked highly”. Studies by *Cardotte & Turgeon (1988)* and *Noe (1999)* also found different aspects in different orders. The complexity is shown by *Taylor & Shanka (2004)* who surveyed 510 guests and found that 57 attributes were considered within their choice of hotel selection; considering the amount of guests a hotel provides for the attributes become even harder to measure. The fact that these studies had so many contrasting findings shows the aspect of tangible and intangible factors and the difficulty in measuring something that is constantly changing.

Grading schemes aim to classify hotels based upon certain attributes, however as seen above these attributes are an issue that many cannot agree upon. Before considering whether the Visit England scheme effectively monitors the correct attributes it is important to understand its classifications and the history behind it.

The most widely recognised hotel assessors within the UK were the AA, RAC & National tourism boards who until January 2007 used different assessment criteria. (*Sylt 2009*) The new system was “created as a result of harmonising standards from the National Tourist Board but also with the cooperation of the AA & RAC”. (*Quality in Tourism 2010*) This was done to make hotel grading more consistent and easier for guests to understand and use. The awarding criterion is no longer based on “subjective principles such as the inspectors impressions of quality” but instead “concrete criteria” (*Sylt 2009*). Many hotels feel they will be losing out due to the inspector’s feelings and experience being overlooked in favour for a standard and emotionless tick-box system. (*Sylt, 2006 p42*)

Figure 3.2 An explanation of Star Ratings



Source : www.qualityintourism.com (2010)

Despite now having identical assessment criteria the grading scheme has become more complex, with many categories now having sub-categories each with their own set of requirements, so the classification awarded can have a different meaning depending on which sub-category it was assessed within, e.g. hotel, guest house, budget hotel, bed and breakfast - surely making it more confusing rather than less.

Within the UK there is no legal requirement stating that hotels have to be independently assessed (Callan 1994), meaning that hotels can choose to be a part of a grading scheme or be self-assessed, resulting in a biased opinion, Sylt (2009) argues this affects the integrity of the industry because hoteliers “have only their conscience to govern how many stars they give themselves.” (Also Napier 2006). Self-assessment has also proved popular with large hotel chains who have shunned the new grading scheme and developed their own classifications such as Jury’s Inn’s new branding as “Exceptional Everyday City Hotels” (WIN 2010), this could be due to brand recognition; they do not feel the need for accreditation as people are aware of the expected standards. The chief executive of Jury’s Inn has openly called for the system to be scrapped stating “there is clear evidence of a huge gap between what consumers want and what the grading systems think guests want” (Sharkey 2009) he argues that because the system was invented before the recent internet travel revolution, it fails to take into consideration the things the consumers most want, stating that “the internet means consumers can make smart opinions wholly independent of star ratings.” (Sharkey 2009)

The assessments are awarded using stars, with One Star being the lowest and Five Star being the highest (as shown in figure 3.2), “Star ratings symbolise the level of service, range of facilities and quality of guest care that you can expect” (Forest Web 1999). The AA has been inspecting and recommending accommodation since 1908; with the star rating system being in place since 1912 i.e. for 98 years, (The Automobile Association Limited 2009) which shows that it must have had a place within society. However current changes to the system including re-branding, as well as increasing presence of CIT, suggest there are now many alternatives for hotel selection. Sylt (2009) argues that “critics complain that the quality of a guests experience cannot be judged by specific amenities” and that the system is stuck in the past, saying “online reviews are becoming increasingly important and so is the internet as a research tool” (a point bought up also by Griggs 2004). Within the article, an MD of a hospitality consultancy firm says “it is less relevant to be informed of whether the hotel is a three, four or five star rating and reading reviews left by people on trip advisor, despite not being consistent, give you more of an insight.”

Nobles & Griggs (2008) questioned whether the ratings were as valuable as they were, querying whether it had been "eroded by technology", they concluded that "a high rating alone is no assurance of success but it can be one more positive marketing tool". The validity of ratings has also been under pressure from within the industry, with professionals openly admitting that they too have begun to look towards online review sites for hotel selection. A recent report talking about online review site ‘Trip Advisor’ (Sharkey 2009 p32) stated “Some industry figures think that the site is becoming more relevant than the star rating systems”. Thomas (2009) states that "Trip Advisor and similar user-review websites now influence corporate decisions on hotels to the tune of £500m a year" proving that this is not a trend to be ignored, “Out of 1000 business travellers asked, 28% seek advice using online consumer reviews, and 41% have changed their mind after reading other peoples travel experiences." The survey revealed that the influence of word of mouth recommendations outweighed the official ratings. See figure 3.3 illustrating the popularity of Trip Advisor.

Figure 3.3 Facts and Figures on Trip Advisor

Trip Advisor has more than 25 million travel reviews and opinions from travellers around the world including:

- 68,000-plus cities
- 400,000-plus hotels
- 90,000-plus attractions
- 551,000-plus restaurants
- 1,793,000-plus traveller photos covering 100,000-plus hotels

The argument behind many of these views is that customer satisfaction cannot be generalised using a hotel grading scheme; all guests are different and want different things from different places. Nobles (2006) argued “there will be inaccuracies as long as there is a rating system”.

Anderson et al (2008) state that “customer characteristics have an important effect on the level of customer satisfaction” this relates to such characteristics as gender, age, income and career, this is also a point raised by *Fornell et al. (1996)*, *Johnson & Fornell (1991)*, *Kamakura et al (2002)* and *Noe (1999)*.

Table 3.2 Example of Factors affecting hotel selection

Customer perceptions based on past experiences, travelling frequency and culture	Existing quality grading
Purpose of Visit (Business or Pleasure)	Published prices and agreed terms
Account Settlement (Who is paying? Company, agent, guest settling own account)	Knowledge of a particular hotel (personal recommendation, guides, branding, marketing)
Method of travel	Lead time between booking and occupation
Location of Hotel	Booking Source (secretary, agent, personal)

Source: Ingram (1996)

4.0 Method of Investigation

This research paper uses an inductive approach and aims to investigate further the key factors, attributes and processes used by guests in hotel selection. The key factors and attributes will play a role in assessing the effectiveness of Visit England's new assessment criteria, this will be done using questionnaires including open-ended questions so that guests can elaborate on their own requirements, rather than selecting from set requirements, this can then be matched against the criteria of Visit England, giving recommendations for improvement. The second area being investigation of the selection method used, this will be done through the use of tick box questions to establish the awareness of Visit England and the awareness and perceived reliability of online review sites. The questionnaire will also involve an open ended question to discover alternative selection processes used, in order to make recommendations for hoteliers and hotel guests. The final question will investigate preference between traditional grading schemes and alternative online methods.

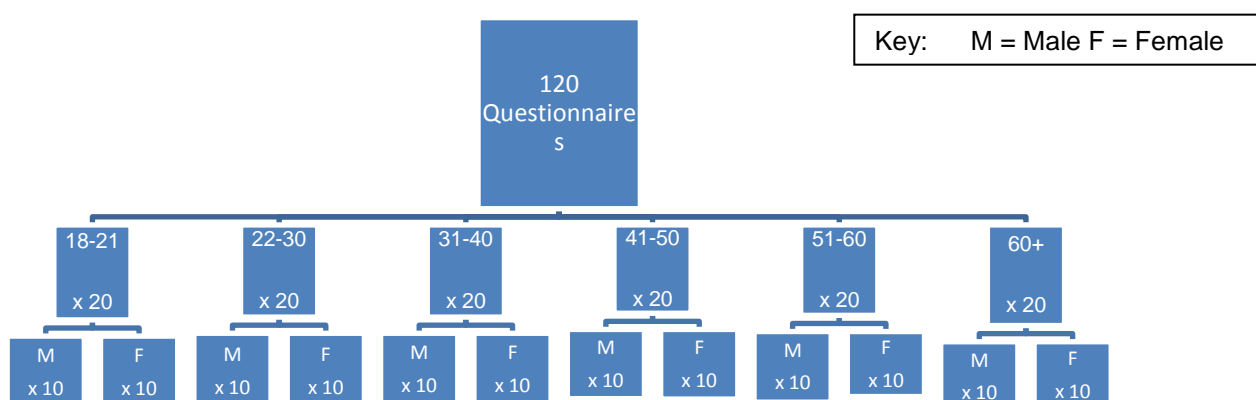
After the questionnaires have been conducted two interviews will be undertaken to obtain a more in-depth understanding of requirements for different age groups. The interviews will be carried out on:

1. A member of the younger generation who is extremely dependent upon technology and possibly unaware of the hotel grading schemes and what the classifications mean.
2. A member of the older, more conservative, generation who has not grown up with technology and will be more likely to know about hotel grading schemes.

The questionnaire will be distributed using a convenience stratified sample. This sample has been selected so that a representative sample can be gained, with people from all generations, allowing no room for socio-economic bias in gender or age. The questionnaire will be distributed according to figure 4.1.

Questionnaire are an easy way of bringing together large amounts of information under a given topic, allowing for collation and compiling of pie charts as well as giving the participant chance to input their own perspective. Justification for each question can be found in the Research Agenda in Figure 4.1

Figure 4.1 Distribution of Questionnaires



4.1 Research agenda

Table 4.1 Research Agenda

<u>Question</u>	<u>Justification</u>
Age Group	This essential socio-economic data will enable a representative sample to be collected, highlighting any differences between age groups, establishing whether the grading scheme is becoming outdated with the generations. (Saunders et al 2003 p169)
Male/Female	To ensure that a representative sample has been collected each age group will be made up of half male and half female. "Customer characteristics have an important effect on the level of customer satisfaction." Through this sample we will enable any differences in gender to be identified (Anderson et al 2008)
Have you been away with England within the last 12 months?	To ensure that the data collected is reliable it is important that they are completed by people who have recently stayed in hotels in England. This will guarantee the key features and trends are relevant when making recommendations for hoteliers and Visit England.
How often do you go/stay away within England?	This is to establish their frequency of travelling, in order to gain an insight into how often they use the relevant methods, e.g. if they travel once a year do they only use these methods once a year? As well as highlighting through the age groups which sectors travel most and which are the groups to target.
How do you choose a place to stay?	This is an open-ended question due to the inductive approach of this research, aimed to "get a feel of what's going on" (Saunders et al 2003 p89) highlighting key trends which can then be used when making recommendations.
What do you look for when selecting a place to stay?	This is an open-ended question to gather personal preferences, many past studies have given examples and categories however I used this question to gather information which can then be categorised, once again using the inductive approach of Saunders, gathering information so as to understand better.
Are you aware of the Visit England grading scheme and what the classifications mean?	With this question I included three options (Yes, No and Heard of Visit England but unaware of what it is/means) This was done to establish whether people were ignorant of the scheme completely or just unaware of the classifications meanings
Is a Visit England classification likely to influence your choice of place to stay?	This question was a yes/no answer included to gather information towards the recommendations for hoteliers regarding the value of a Visit England classification to their hotel.
Are you likely to be put off by a hotel not having a Visit England Classification?	This question was a Yes/No answer included to determine whether the scheme had an impact in relation to the amount of people who knew what the scheme was, did they feel the classification meant enough to be put off if the hotel as was not part of Visit England. This question will form the recommendations given to hoteliers.

Do you own an AA Guide or anything similar?	This was a Yes/No question included in order to compare with the socio economic data and establish whether such guides were evident across certain age groups more than others.
Do you ever use Websites such as Trip Advisor?	This was a tick box answer with various options, this was included to establish the degree to which trip advisor was used and to compare between age groups as to whether this seems to be a trend within the younger generations, in order to offer recommendations for guests and hoteliers.
Do you trust Trip Advisor as a good judgement of places to stay? and why?	This question was included as an open question to further investigate the comment in Sylt's article (2009) saying "reading reviews left by people on trip advisor, despite not being consistent, give you more of an insight" This question is used to gauge the extent that guests let comments on trip advisor influence their choice of place to stay.
Which Hotel selection method do you prefer?	This was an outright question having the option of either "traditional Visit England methods" or "alternative online methods". This was done to gather information to compile a basic pie chart, and to make comparisons between socio economic groups, identifying any differences.

Source: Author derived from Saunders et al (2003 p169), (Anderson et al 2008), Sylt 2009)

5.0 Findings & Analysis

5.1 Questionnaires

The questionnaires uncovered a trend of using CIT in the hotel selection process, however this appeared to be through the use of web searches and the hotels own websites, as well as online booking agents, rather than trip advisor and online review sites as predicted. The question "How often do you go away/stay within England" showed that the majority of people staying in hotels 2-3 times a year, with 21 out of these 43 people being under the age of 30. This shows that the younger generation are an important part of the English tourism economy and hoteliers should take them into consideration.

The age group 41-50 Males had the highest response rate of "more than this" to question 2, which could be explained by travelling with work. Another age group that answered "more than this" was the over 60's, this could be due to them being retired and therefore having more free time. Interestingly both of the above age groups showed a preference to alternative online methods over the Visit England Classifications.

Figure 5.1 How often do you go away/stay within England?

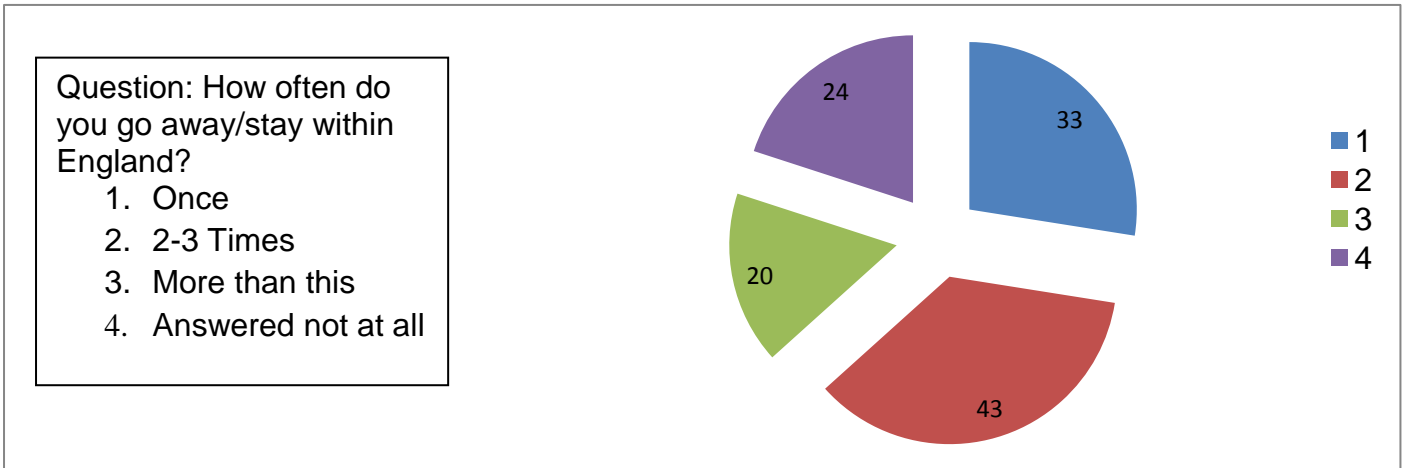


Figure 5.2 Are you aware of the Visit England grading scheme?

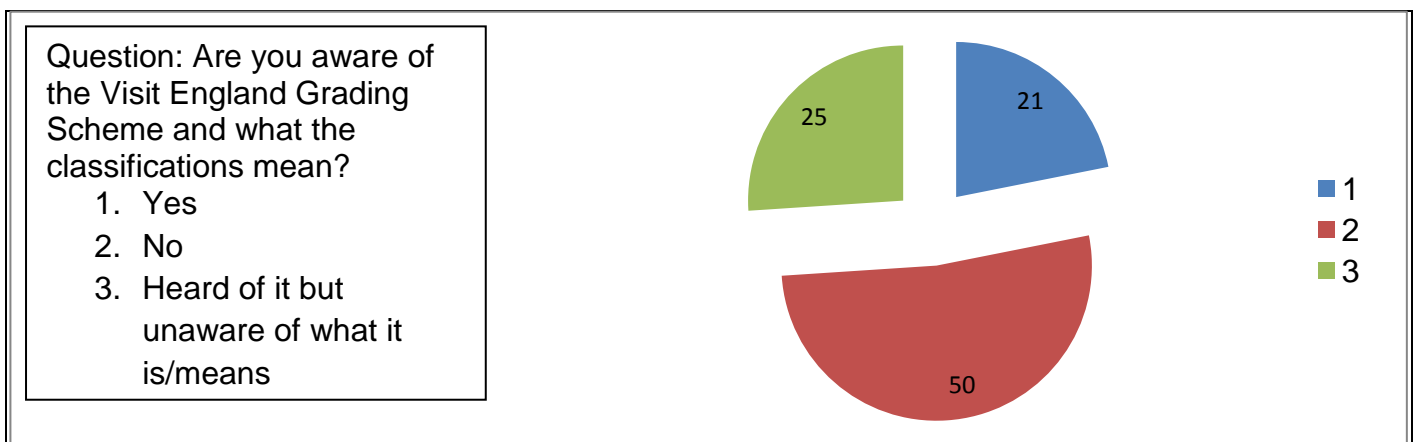


Figure 5.2 shows that the majority of people are unaware of the grading scheme, however after the research was complete I spoke to some of the participants and explained that they were the star ratings used by the AA many of them knew what they were. This could show that due to the

grading scheme changing names there has not been enough promotion - one member of the 60+ age group commented that he was unaware of the scheme but went away and researched it, after which he recommended that the scheme should be better promoted.

Because there was no explanation as to what Visit England was, the answers to the next two questions were affected; this question could be improved by including a brief explanation about the scheme after question 5. However, despite only 25 people answering that they knew what the Visit England Grading scheme was 32 people answered that it would influence their choice of place to stay. This could conclude that a grading scheme system is still valued.

Figure 5.3 Is a Visit England classification likely to influence your choice of place to stay?

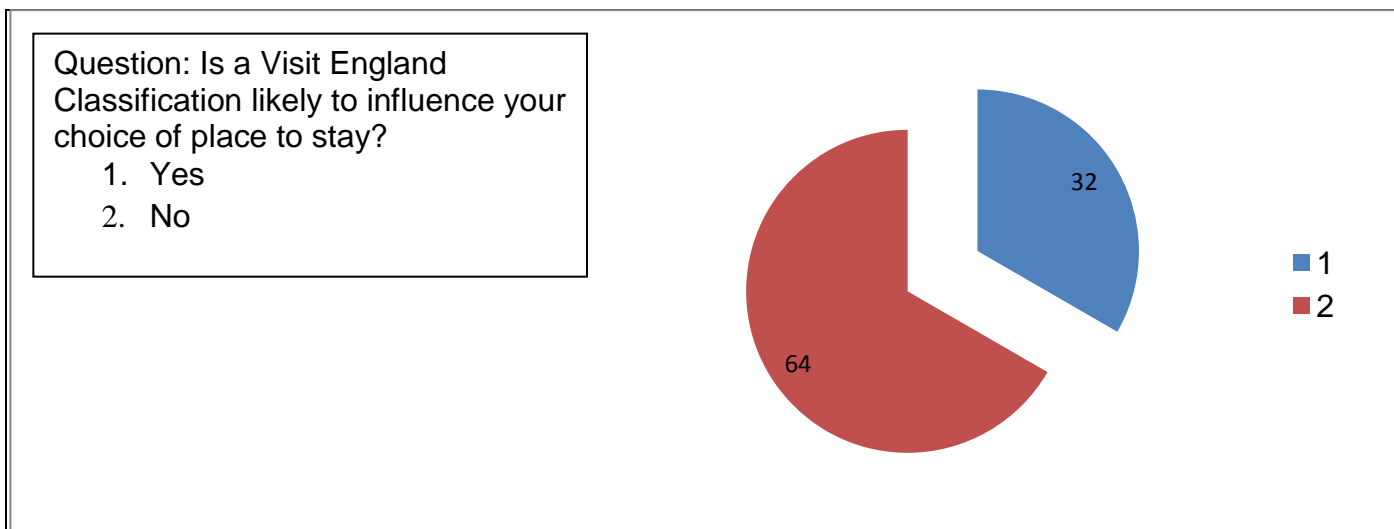


Figure 5.4 Are you likely to be put off by a hotel not having a Visit England Classification?

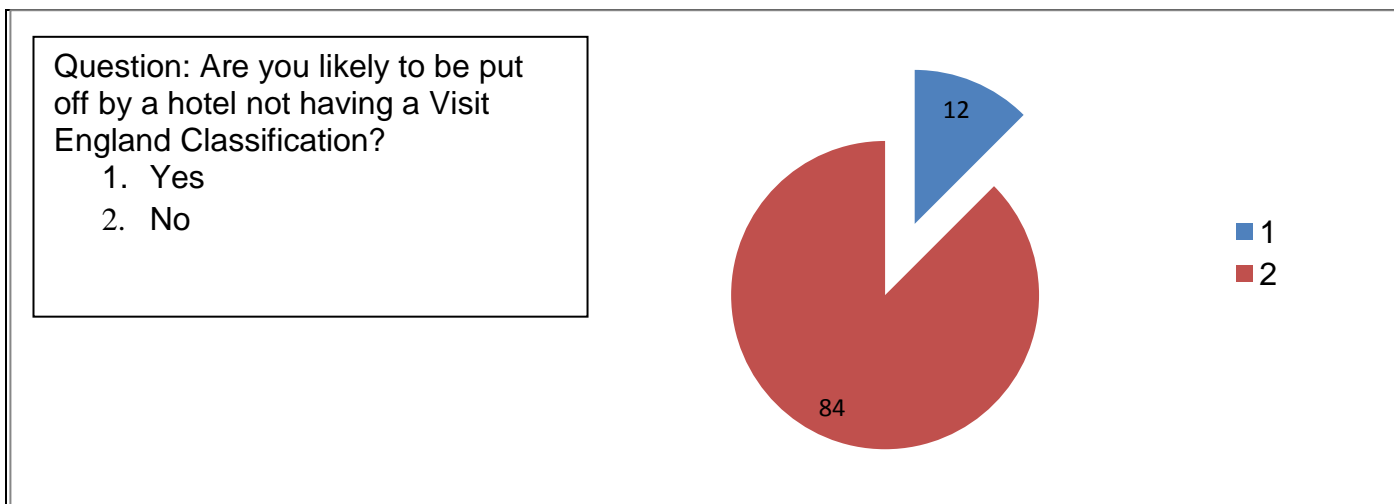


Figure 5.3 shows that although 32 people said they would let a visit England qualification influence their choice of place to stay, only 10% of the people surveyed would be put off a hotel due to it not having a Visit England qualification. This shows that there are factors that are valued more than a hotels star rating's and hotels that are not part of Visit England can still be successful by approaching their customers via other methods i.e. online.

Figure 5.5 Do you own an AA Guide or anything similar?

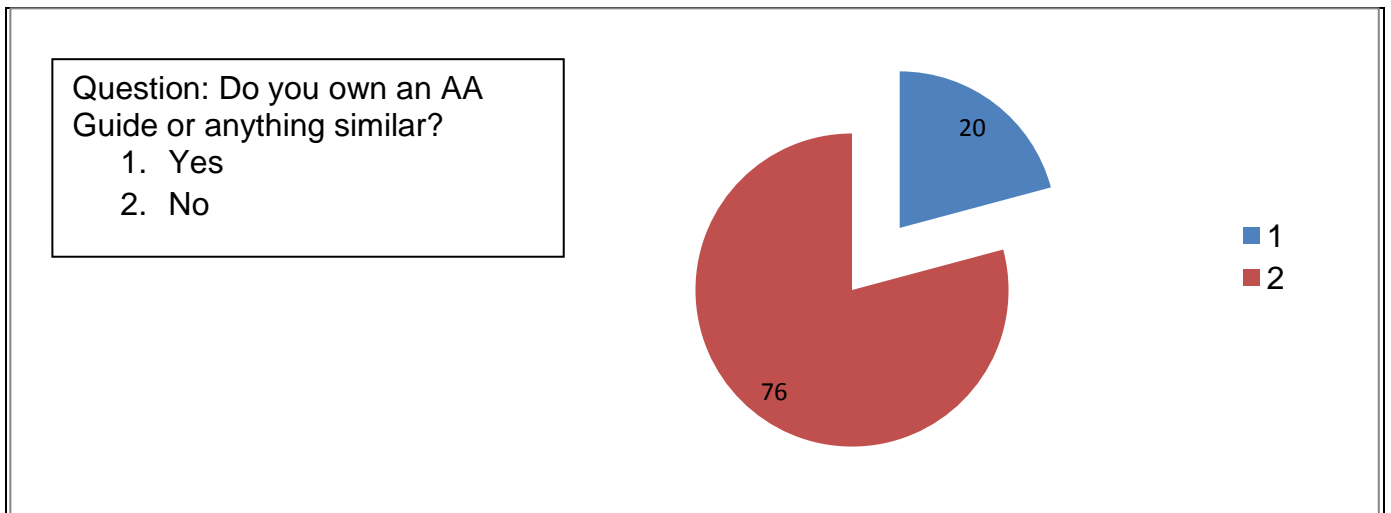


Figure 5.5 shows that there are still people that own the AA Guide, with at least one person in each age group answering yes, however the age group that had the highest "yes" response was 60+, showing that the AA guide seems to be disappearing through generations. There were a few respondents who wrote next to this question such things as "used to but not anymore" or "no but I access it online", showing that they have progressed from the AA guide.

Figure 5.6. Do you ever use websites such as Trip Advisor?

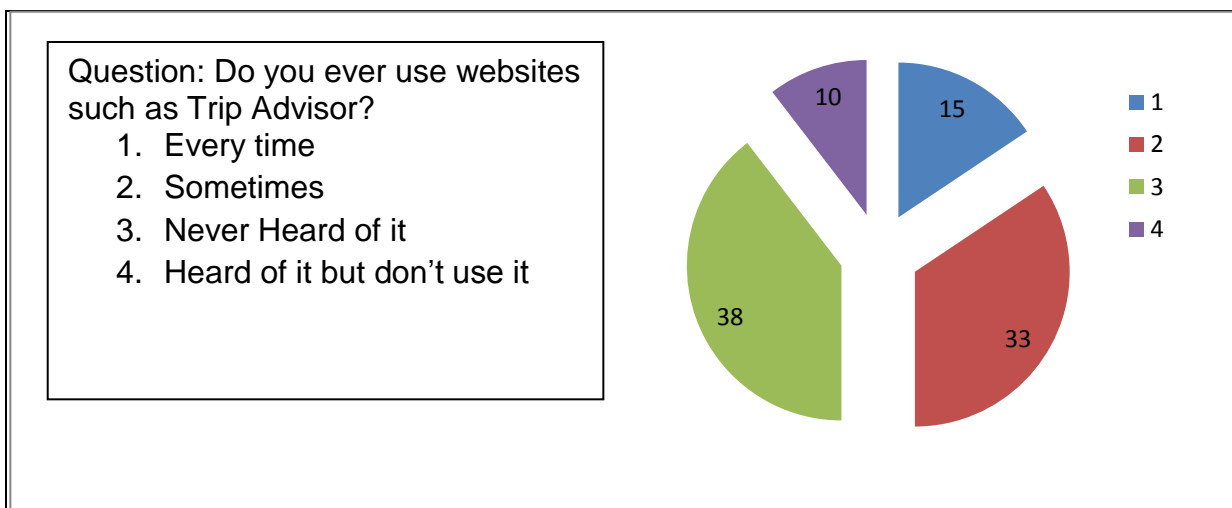
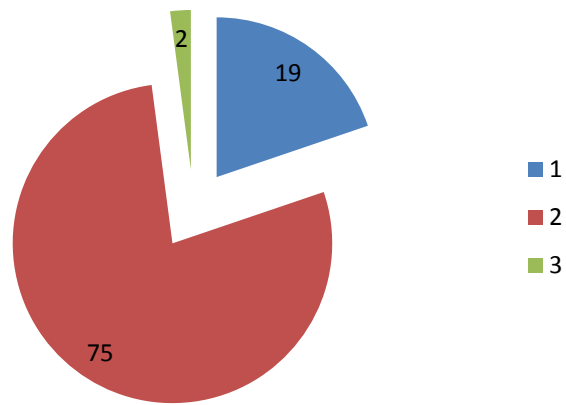


Figure 5.6 showed that although trip advisor is not used every time it is popular with the younger generation, with only 6 people under 30 saying that they had never heard of it! The frequency of people who answered "every time" was higher in the younger age group with 11 out of the 15 people being under 30. Although the uptake of use of Trip Advisor was not as large as expected it was still evident that people were using the internet via web searches, hotels own websites and online booking agencies such as lastminute.com.

Figure 5.7 Which hotel selection method do you prefer

Question: Which Hotel Selection method do you prefer?

1. Traditional Visit England Methods
2. Alternative Online Methods
3. 2 people created their own box saying “a mixture of both”



This question was very unevenly answered, with “online” being the majority vote, however I feel that if the explanation had been added after question 5 then the responses to this question would have been different; alternatively there could have been a grading scale for this question, for example:

Please rate the following hotel selection methods according to your personal preferences, with one being the lowest and 10 being the highest:

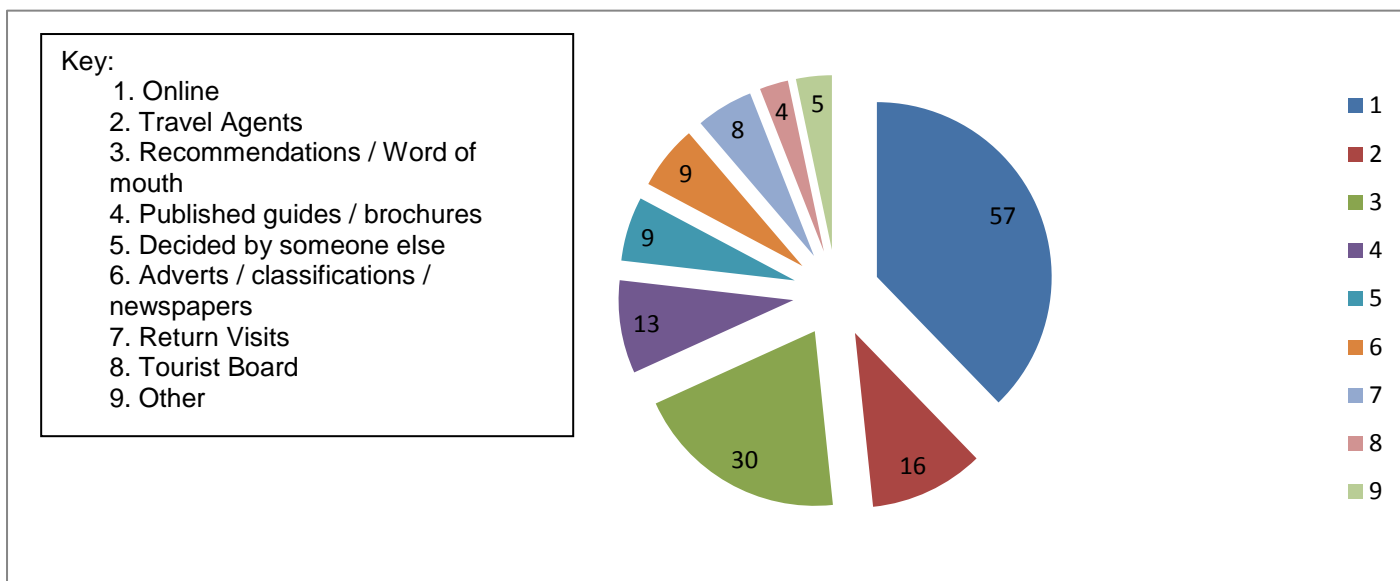
Traditional hotel grading schemes: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Alternative online methods: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5.2 Open-ended questionnaires

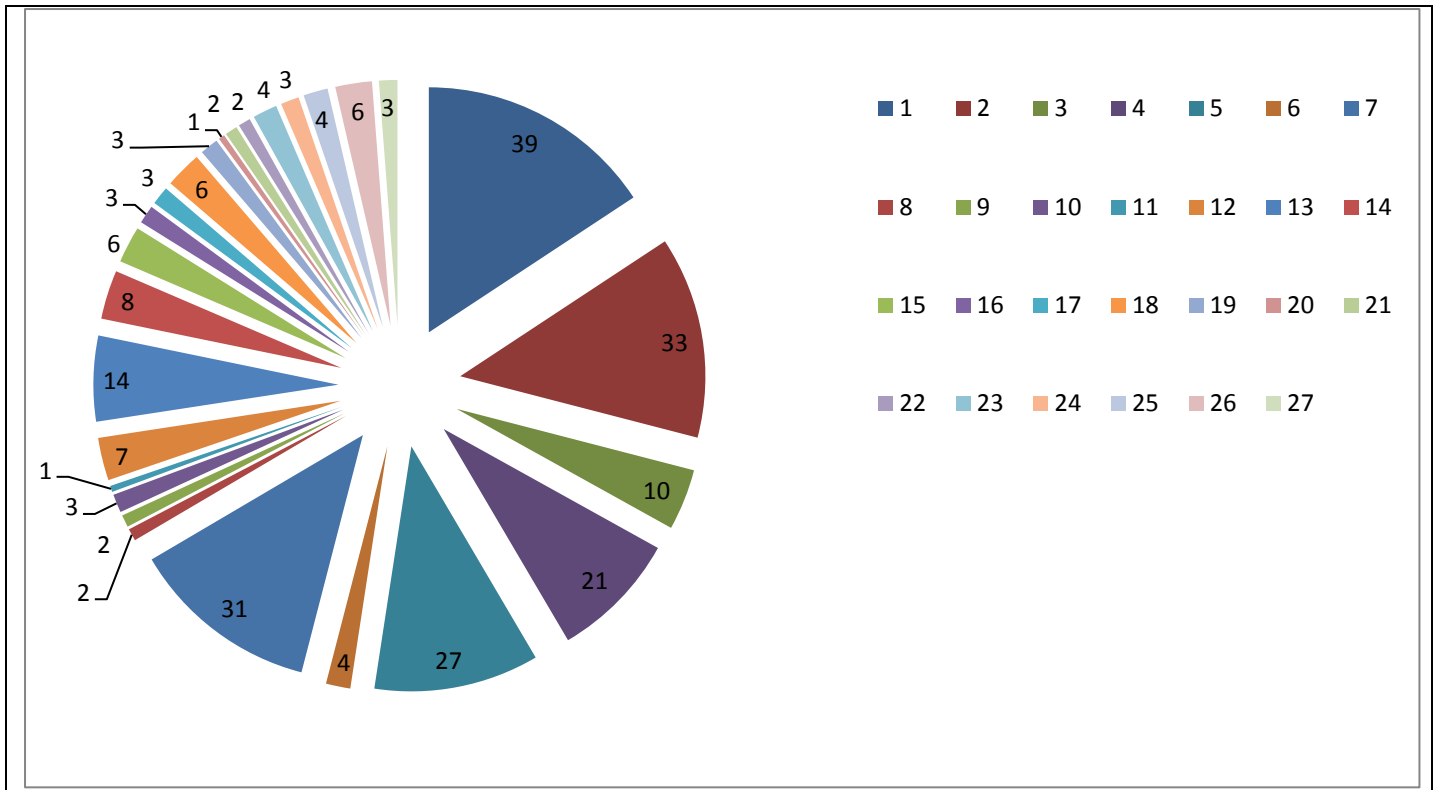
Within the questionnaire there were three open-ended questions, these allowed the participant to add their own views. The answers given have been categorised and as shown in figure 5.8, online hotel selection methods was the most popular answer, followed by recommendations. These findings reflect the comments made by Sylt (2009) stating that the internet is a powerful research tool and people are taking into consideration personal recommendations, either through word of mouth or online. The “online” category included hotel websites, trip advisor, last minute.com and search engines.

Figure 5.8. How do you select a place to stay?



Question 4 asks “What do you look for when selecting a place to stay?” the results concluded similarly to past research; that there are many different attributes, all having a different relevance to different guests, making it hard to establish which aspects should be included within a grading scheme. Within this sample the attributes were categorised into 27 different areas. As shown in figure 5.9, Tea & Coffee Making facilities within the room only had 3 responses, in contrast to location and price this would seem to be of low importance, however clearly it was of high importance to these 3 respondents.

Figure 5.9 What do you look for when selecting a place to stay?



Key:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| 1. Location | 15. Transport Links |
| 2. Price | 16. Big Bed |
| 3. Ensuite | 17. Depends upon reason for visit |
| 4. Bar/Restaurant | 18. Family rooms/ Child Friendly |
| 5. Close to Amenities | 19. Breakfast included |
| 6. Good reviews | 20. WIFI |
| 7. Facilities in Hotel | 21. TV in room |
| 8. Star Rating | 22. Fast Check in |
| 9. Mini Bar | 23. 24 Hour reception/late check in |
| 10. Room Service | 24. Coffee/Tea Making Facilities in room |
| 11. Trouser Press | 25. Friendly staff |
| 12. Cleanliness | 26. On-Site Parking |
| 13. Leisure Facilities | 27. Pets Accepted |
| 14. Nice/comfy/big bedrooms | |

5.3 Semi- Structured Interviews

5.3.1 Interview with Participant 1 - Aged 23.

The participant was a regular traveller, for pleasure purposes, staying in different areas of the country, usually trips for long weekends or Monday-Friday breaks. These holidays were supplementary to a two week holiday abroad, The participant identified important aspects as:

- Nearby restaurants, amenities and tourist attractions
- Ensuite, comfy room with a big bed
- Friendly staff
- Breakfast included

The participant's main information source was the internet, due to large amounts of information available in one place. Preferred selection methods were search engines and hotel websites to get an understanding of the hotel before checking trip advisor for other guests' opinions. This area was discussed further, discovering that the participant would let the reviews found on trip advisor influence his choice and consider not booking the hotel based upon bad reviews.

The participant was initially unaware of Visit England however once the star ratings were mentioned he said that although he didn't look specifically what star a hotel was before booking he may let a low star rating influence his choice. This shows that hotels which have been demoted by the new scheme may be better off without a classification.

5.3.2 Interview with Participant 2 - Aged 56

The participant travelled once a year, usually for a week, travelling for pleasure purposes. This was a small holiday, to supplement the two holidays abroad that they have each year. The participant used a search engine before visiting the hotel website, although usually has an idea of where they would like to visit due to word of mouth recommendations. Due to the nature of the holiday the participant identified the following aspects as important:

- Location
- Local Pubs and amenities
- Tea & Coffee making facilities in the room

The participant said he had heard of Trip Advisor from people when travelling abroad but never used it himself and preferred to make his own mind up. The participant was unaware of Visit England however once the scheme was explained including the use of stars he said that he always looks for what star rating it is, saying that he likes that B&B's are graded separately to hotels now because it is "fairer", He said that he would be put off by a hotel not having a classification because he wouldn't know what to expect. This fits with the literature on customer satisfaction in that guests build up expectations before they arrive, as this causes uncertainty.

The participant chose online methods over Visit England, however stated that despite looking online he still considers grading schemes because most websites say what star rating they are. This highlights that the grading scheme does not have to be substituted by the use of CIT but can be complimentary.

6.0 Conclusions

6.1 Conclusions of study and its findings

From the information gathered within the study we can see that there is a clear shift of hotel selection methods, through the use of CIT, however there is no clear indication that the grading scheme will become invalid and as shown in the two participant interviews it is clear that the internet is being used due to the ease of access to information.

It is evident that hotel grading schemes will never be able to entirely measure and satisfy every guests needs due to socio-economic factors making everybody different. The scheme however is there to give guidance and if the correct promotional methods are taken to ensure that Visit England becomes known by the general public as a hotel grading classification then it will continue to be used within hospitality. Although research shows that the internet is being used by the majority of people in the hotel selection process this does not mean that they are using online review sites but instead there seems to be a strong pattern of people using a web search engine such as Google and then visiting the hotel's website directly. If this is the case then as long as the Visit England rating is promoted on the site then it will remain a valuable marketing tool for hotels and a reliable point of guidance for guests.

From the questionnaire there was a majority response for online methods however the interviews highlight that star ratings are still part of the decision making process, for this reason this study has reached the null hypothesis that: "The star rating system is still widely used, either as a main tool within hotel selection or alongside the more modern alternatives"; Coming to the conclusion that due to the history of hotel grading schemes and the popularity of star ratings, the scheme will continue to be relevant as a complimentary method to the online alternatives.

6.2 Recommendations for future research

This study was carried out with an inductive approach and as such has uncovered areas which further research is required. Confusion seemed to arise when Visit England was mentioned, however this could have been due to the recent re-branding, as discussions with participants after the research had been carried out showed that people knew about the star ratings however weren't aware of the new changes, in order to gather more information on their understanding of Visit England focus groups could be conducted with similar age groups to discover their views on ratings and enable the researcher to investigate further in discussion with participants their understandings of the classification and how it may affect their process of hotel selection, this could explain the findings of only 12 people saying that they would be put off by a hotel not having a visit England classification.

Further research could be done into the online selection process to establish which websites are being used by guests, as some participants named specific sites that they used under the question "how do you choose a place to stay?" with responses such as lastminute.com and trip advisor, as well as responses saying web search, if this is the case what information do guests look for about the hotels before making their decision? Another area that could be developed further is the guests reasons for using the internet over other selection methods, is it due to convenience of information, do they find it easier to understand or is it done because they are unaware of the other methods?

The study can be used as a base for gathering information however in order to deeper understand guest selection methods further research needs to be carried out into specific patterns of selection.

6.3 Recommendations for Visit England

The re-branding of Visit England has led to confusion amongst potential guests, with many of the people surveyed stating that they did not know what Visit England was. Furthermore only 19 people stated that they preferred Visit England over online hotel selection methods. From the information gathered in this study, my recommendations would be that their marketing strategy needs to be improved in order to make more people aware of the role that Visit England can play in the harmonisation of standards across the country, giving people a measurement tool they can trust. Visit England should use the internet and encompass trends of CIT to promote themselves; for example, Applications for Smartphone's, offering a similar version of the AA guide in different formats.

Unlike Trip Advisor, Visit England has a reliable system of criteria in place, they could use this as more of a selling point – making sure that the criteria are widely known and ensuring guests know what to expect from each of the classifications.

It is an important consideration for Visit England that the brand is not changed again, guests need to see the brand as something that is here to stay and can be relied upon.

6.4 Recommendations for Hoteliers

The increasing influence of CIT within hotel selection means that hoteliers have no choice but to spend time and money on making sure their website states the correct information including rates, availability and the ability to book online. Hotel websites may also have reviews from previous guests, allowing a more personal recommendation for readers.

Hoteliers also need to ensure that they are aware of what has been posted on Trip Advisor about their hotel so that if comments are made by guests expressing concern then can respond. Hotels can also sign up to Trip Advisor so that responses can be posted against reviews, be them bad or good they should all be seen as important.

Hotels having a star rating which they are pleased with should stick with the system, because although people may not know what Visit England is within the questionnaires, the interviews found that people were aware of the stars. Star ratings can be used as a positive form of marketing, people may be debating between two similar hotels, both with good reviews, however if one has a star rating and the other one doesn't this can only work within their favour.

Hotels which have dropped out of the system due to being classified lower after the new grading began, according to the research found in this paper, should not see a difference in visitors if they focus highly on creating a unique experience; that will create customer satisfaction which will generate good word of mouth reviews. Hotels that choose not to be part of a grading scheme need to make sure their presence is known on the internet as a form of marketing – have a look if you are on Trip Advisor, if you are then these reviews are being read so make sure they are good! Another important tool is Google, have a look at your hotel's presence when typing in "hotels in" if you aren't near the top then advertise and ensure that your hotel is known. Hotel Grading is something that hotels can survive without, however only if they enhance their other assets.

6.5 Recommendations for Hotel guests

As shown in the study it is becoming more and more apparent that CIT is taking over in terms of hotel selection, however it is important for guests not to rely upon a website such as Trip Advisor to base their entire decision upon, there are factors that need to be incorporated into a guests selection process; What are your reasons for visiting the area? What do you want from the hotel? If the review is bad on Trip Advisor then look at the age group of the reviewer, when the review was posted and consider other opinions not just that one bad one!

Guests should look at the hotel's own website, read through the information and look at pictures and get a feel for the place, as well as looking at other websites; lastminute.com have their own reviews and also allow responses from the hotel on the comments made.

If guests are unsure of a hotel, look what rating it is, if it has been classified then look at what the classification means and you will understand what facilities the hotel must have in order to have been awarded the classification. After this process if guests are still unsure speak to people who have been to the area, get opinions from people they know, maybe even telephone the hotel and speak to a member of staff about any concerns.

The Hotel Selection process is a complex one, because the needs of the customer are complex. It is important for a guest not to rush into a choice but instead to consider their options. One perspective will never entirely satisfy guest's expectations because we are all different!

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