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THE EFFECT OF HEDONIC AND UTILITARIAN FACTORS ON OVERALL HOTEL RATINGS ON BOOKING.COM: EVIDENCE FROM FOUR-STAR HOTELS IN VARNA

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Abstract. *Every product and service provides consumers with two types of value: utilitarian and hedonic. Utilitarian value is associated with functional and practical benefits, while hedonic value reflects emotional and sensory experiences. Together, these components form the consumer's perceived value, which in the context of the hotel industry is most commonly manifested through the overall online rating on accommodation platforms.*

The aim of the present study is to determine which of the two value dimensions—utilitarian or hedonic—has a stronger influence on the formation of the overall hotel rating. For this purpose, the individual subcategories of the rating system on Booking.com (value for money, cleanliness, facilities, location, comfort, and staff) were conceptually classified into the two value dimensions. The study covers 63 four-star hotels located in the municipality of Varna, Bulgaria.Based on the collected data, two linear regression models were applied to assess the influence of each value dimension on the overall rating. The results indicate that both dimensions have a strong and statistically significant effect, with utilitarian factors exerting a slightly stronger impact ($R^2 = 0.921$) compared to hedonic factors ($R^2 = 0.878$). These findings highlight the importance of balancing functional quality with positive emotional experiences in order to enhance the perceived value of the stay and strengthen the hotel's competitiveness in the online environment.

Keywords: customer satisfaction; perceived value; hedonic value; utilitarian value; online ratings.

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INTRODUCTION

Online customer ratings in the hospitality industry are an important source of information about customer satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) (Li et al., 2020; Radojevic et al., 2017). They are used by consumers to form an overall impression of the standards and quality of hotel services (Leung & Yang, 2020). For travelers, online ratings provide quick and easily accessible information that minimizes the risk of making an unsatisfactory choice. A high rating creates trust, reduces information asymmetry, and leads to a higher number of bookings. According to Öğüt & Onur Taş (2012), ratings influence travelers' decisions more strongly than the hotel's star classification. For hoteliers, a high rating is a prerequisite for increasing sales, occupancy, and profit, as well as for building a competitive advantage and an image (Viglia et al., 2016). Therefore, maintaining high ratings on online platforms is a priority for most hotel managers.

The academic literature has examined various factors that influence consumer evaluations, such as travel purpose, guest demographics, hotel chain affiliation, capacity, star rating, etc. (Anderson, 2012; Jezierski, 2022; Proserpio & Zervas, 2017; Radojevic et al., 2017). At the same time, the extent to which different aspects of the hotel stay shape the overall rating remains insufficiently explored. Hotel service includes both functional elements (e.g., location and cleanliness) and emotional components (e.g., comfort and staff attitude), yet their relative contribution to the final consumer evaluation is not clearly established.

The aim of the present study is to compare the influence of utilitarian (functional) and hedonic (emotional) dimensions of the hotel experience on the overall consumer rating on the Booking.com platform**.** The article is structured as follows: the next section presents the theoretical framework regarding perceived value and its dimensions. Then, the methodology and data used are described. The results of the analysis are presented in the fourth section, and the final part contains discussion, limitations, and directions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Perceived value and customer satisfaction

Perceived value represents the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product or service based on perceptions of what is received and what is given (Zeithaml, 1988). It reflects the balance between the benefits obtained and the efforts, money, and time invested (Ryu et al., 2010). When the perceived value exceeds the invested resources, satisfaction is generated, while when the expected benefits fail to justify the costs, dissatisfaction arises (Carpenter, 2008; Pallas et al., 2014).

Customer satisfaction is a consequence of perceived value (Babin et al., 1994), and therefore achieving high satisfaction requires first creating high value for the customer. This is particularly challenging because value perception is highly individual and determined solely by the consumers themselves (Javed & Cheema, 2017).

According to Babin et al. (1994) perceived value has a two-dimensional structure – utilitarian and hedonic. Utilitarian value refers to the functional and instrumental benefits that the consumer derives from a given service or product (Pallas et al., 2014). It is rational, easily measurable and does not generate emotional engagement on the part of the customer (Chitturi et al., 2008). Hedonic value, on the other hand, is related to the emotional and sensory experience of the consumers and satisfies their needs for pleasure, excitement and enjoyment (Babin et al., 1994; Tamir et al., 2008). It is subjective, intangible and experienced in an individual way, which makes it difficult to measure, reproduce or compare (Chitturi et al., 2008; Pallas et al., 2014). It often does not reflect objective reality, but rather the individual's perception of the desired experience (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000).

Every product or service – regardless of its nature – provides consumers with both types of value: utilitarian and hedonic (Pallas et al., 2014). A visit to a restaurant, for example – a service with a predominantly hedonic nature – combines utilitarian elements (such as price and meal size) with hedonic benefits (such as music, personal service and atmosphere). Similarly, a hotel stay – also perceived as a hedonic service – combines utilitarian aspects (such as price, location, available parking, etc.) with hedonic experiences (such as personal attention, a sense of coziness and comfort).

In the academic literature, the influence of hedonic and utilitarian values on customer satisfaction has been widely studied in various fields – such as retail (Carpenter, 2008; Jones et al., 2006), shopping in malls (Allard et al., 2009), online shopping (Avcilar & Özsoy, 2015; Overby & Lee, 2006), restaurant business (Hanzaee & Rezaeyeh, 2013), information and communication technologies (Kim & Han, 2011), travel (Scholl-Grissemann & Schnurr, 2016). Although all authors agree that both types of value have an impact on customer satisfaction,

their relative influence is context-dependent, varying according to individual characteristics, cultural background, service environment and consumption situation (Zeithaml, 1988).

For example, Allard et al. (2009) found that utilitarian value is more influential among higher-income consumers, while hedonic value predominates among lower-income consumers. A study by Klegr (2024) reports that for tourists using Airbnb, hedonic value has a stronger impact on satisfaction compared to those choosing traditional hotels, where utilitarian value dominates. A study by Basaran & Buyukyilmaz (2015) shows that for customers visiting fast-casual restaurants, hedonic value is more decisive than for those visiting fast-food establishments. A study by Overby & Lee (2006), focused on online shopping, reports that both values have an impact on buyers, but hedonic value is stronger for less frequent shoppers.

Booking.com

One of the leading global sources of consumer reviews in the hospitality industry is the Booking.com platform (Mellinas et al., 2016). According to ReviewPro data for 2023 (Shiji Group, 2023), it generates nearly 39.5% of all online hotel reviews, which positions it as the most influential online travel platform. The overall rating on Booking.com reflects the customer's general satisfaction with the stay and is calculated on a numerical scale from 1 to 10. In addition to this overall score, Booking.com allows users to rate individual aspects (subcategories) of the stay – such as cleanliness, location, facilities, value for money, comfort and staff service. Existing research shows that all subcategories are positively correlated with the overall hotel rating (Ilieva & Ivanov, 2014; Radojevic et al., 2018), suggesting that they have a significant impact on the overall rating. Considering that some of these indicators are predominantly hedonic and others are utilitarian in nature, it can be assumed that both types of value contribute to the formation of the overall consumer rating. However, it remains unclear whether utilitarian or hedonic elements have a stronger influence on the overall rating. The present study aims to address this question through an exploratory empirical analysis based on user rating data from the Booking.com platform.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the aim of the study, the research was conducted in three consecutive stages (Figure 1), involving the classification of subcategories, hotel selection and ratings collection, and data analysis and interpretation.

The first stage of the methodology involves classifying consumer evaluations into two subcategories: utilitarian and hedonic (Table 1). The classification of subcategories was performed by the author and is based on the conceptual distinction proposed by Babin et al. (1994), who define utilitarian value as functional and goal-oriented, and hedonic value as experiential and emotionally driven.



Figure 1. Methodological stages of the study

Table 1. Classification of Booking.com subcategories by value type

Subcategories	Value
Cleanliness	Utilitarian
Location	Utilitarian
Facilities	Utilitarian
Value for money	Utilitarian
Comfort	Hedonic
Staff	Hedonic

Utilitarian values in the context of a hotel stay refer to the practical and economic benefits that a customer derives from the service. In this study, the following subcategories are considered utilitarian: cleanliness**,** location**,** value for money, and facilities. Cleanliness is directly related to hygiene, safety, and health of guests and is perceived as a basic requirement for any stay (Butcher et al., 2003). Location reflects access to key sites and mobility convenience, which is essential for fulfilling the purpose of travel. As research has shown, practical aspects such as transport accessibility and proximity to attractions represent classic utilitarian dimensions (Klegr, 2024). Value for money expresses the customer's rational economic assessment and lies at the core of their pragmatic behavior when choosing a service (Basaran & Buyukyilmaz, 2015; Ryu et al., 2010). As for facilities, they reflect the presence of functional amenities that satisfy specific needs (e.g., swimming pools, reception desk, parking, etc.) and are therefore also classified as utilitarian.

Hedonic values, on the other hand, refer to the emotional, social, and experiential benefits that go beyond the functional dimension and create a sense of pleasure and personal satisfaction. In the current study, the subcategories comfort and staff are identified as hedonic. Comfort is associated with feelings of convenience, relaxation, and coziness that make the stay more enjoyable on an emotional level. Given that the perception of comfort is highly subjective and cannot be reproduced in the same way for different individuals, the author of the study classifies it as a hedonic component. The subcategory staff includes interpersonal interaction and the attention received by the customer during their stay. According to studies, the social and emotional value associated with service is central to the hedonic evaluation of the consumer (Basaran & Buyukyilmaz, 2015; Klegr, 2024; Ryu et al., 2010).

The second stage of the study involves identifying the research sample and collecting empirical data from the Booking.com platform. The focus of this study is on hotels located within the municipality of Varna – a popular tourist destination characterized by both seasonal and year-round accommodations. According to the National Tourism Register of the Republic of Bulgaria, as of June 1, 2025, there are 69 hotels in Varna operating under a valid license in the "four-star" category. Of these, 63 have an active profile on Booking.com and constitute the final sample included in the study. For each of the selected hotels, data were extracted on the overall user rating as well as the scores for the six subcategories publicly available on the platform. The data were manually extracted from the publicly available Booking.com platform by the author, and verified by re-checking the same hotel profiles 24 hours later to ensure accuracy and consistency.

The third stage of the study involved the analysis and interpretation of the collected data. The primary statistical method applied was linear regression. Before its application, descriptive statistics were calculated for the two value-based groups — utilitarian and hedonic. For each group, a composite score was computed as the mean of the corresponding subcategory ratings, which served as the independent variable in the models. Although the use of mean composite scores ensured comparability between the two value groups, the difference in the number of subcategories (four utilitarian versus two hedonic) may have influenced the reliability of the measurement to some extent. To address this and to avoid potential multicollinearity, separate regression models were estimated for each value dimension, allowing for a clearer interpretation of their individual effects. The subcategory ratings within each group demonstrated strong internal correlations ($r = .57–.84$), which further supported the use of grouped analysis**.**

Data processing was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 17.0.

RESULTS

All ratings on Booking.com are measured on a 10-point scale, where 1 indicates very poor performance and 10 represents exceptional quality. According to the descriptive statistics, four-star hotels in Varna demonstrate relatively high levels of customer satisfaction – the average value of the overall consumer rating is 8.11, with values ranging from 5.6 to 9.6 ($SD = 0.78$) (Table 2). When analyzing the value groups, it was found that the average composite score for the utilitarian values (cleanliness, location, facilities, value for money) is 8.27, varying between 6.68 and 9.40 ($SD = 0.62$), while for the hedonic values (comfort, staff) the average value is 8.39, ranging from 6.95 to 9.6 ($SD = 0.63$) (Table 3). Despite the relatively close values, the hedonic indicators are rated higher than the utilitarian ones. It is interesting that the overall rating is lower than the ratings in both value groups. This can be interpreted as a signal of higher criticality in forming the final assessment by customers.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of Booking ratings and value scores

Indicator	N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Std. Dev.
Booking Rating	63	8.11	5.6	9.6	0.78
Utilitarian value	63	8.27	6.68	9.4	0.62
Hedonic value	63	8.39	6.95	9.6	0.63

Table 3. Regression results for utilitarian values

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
	B	Std. Error	Beta				
(Constant)	1.800	.372		4.839	.000		
Utilitarian	1.199	.045	.960	26.716	.000	1.000	1.000

Notes: Dependent Variable: Booking rating, $R^2 = .921$, Adjusted $R^2 = .920$, $F= 713.739$, $p < .001$, Standard Error of the Estimate = 0.2196

Table 4. Regression results for hedonic values

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
	B	Std. Error	Beta				
(Constant)	1.616	.465		-3.477	.001		
Hedonic	1.159	.055	.937	20.981	.000	1.000	1.000

Notes: Dependent Variable: Booking rating, $R^2 = .878$, Adjusted $R^2 = .876$, $F= 440.221$, $p < .001$, Standard Error of the Estimate = 0.2730

To examine how the two value dimensions derived from the Booking.com subcategory ratings relate to the overall hotel score, two separate linear regression analyses were conducted.

The results from the first model (Table 3) indicate that utilitarian values have a strong and statistically significant effect on the user rating ($\beta = 0.960$, $t = 26.716$, $p < .001$), explaining 92.1% of its variance ($R^2 = 0.921$). The regression equation (Booking rating = 1.800 + 1.199 × Utilitarian value) indicates that for each one-unit increase in the utilitarian value, the predicted value of the user rating increases by 1.199 points, assuming the constant remains fixed.

The results of the regression analysis for the hedonic values also show a strong influence on the booking rating (Table 4). In this case, $\beta = 0.937$, $t = 20.981$, $p < .001$, explaining 87.8% of its variance ($R^2 = 0.878$). The regression equation (Booking rating = 1.616 + 1.159 × Hedonic value) indicates that for each one-unit increase in the hedonic value, the predicted value of the user rating increases by 1.159 points, assuming the constant remains fixed.

In summary, both utilitarian and hedonic value dimensions showed a strong and statistically significant relationship with the overall hotel rating, with the utilitarian factors demonstrating a slightly stronger predictive power.

DISCUSSION

Summary

The results of the study indicate that both utilitarian (cleanliness, location, facilities, value for money) and hedonic (comfort, staff) value dimensions are strongly and significantly related to the overall hotel rating on Booking.com. However, the utilitarian dimension demonstrates a slightly stronger influence ($R^2 = 0.921$) compared to the hedonic dimension ($R^2 = 0.878$). This indicates that, in the examined context, customers place greater emphasis on functional and practical service attributes when forming their overall evaluations. These findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that although

both value types contribute to satisfaction, utilitarian factors often exert a relatively stronger effect (Babin et al., 2005; Basaran & Buyukyilmaz, 2015; Ha & Jang, 2010; Ryu et al., 2010).

Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings imply that maintaining high performance in functional aspects such as hygiene standards, location convenience, and adequate amenities is critical for sustaining strong online ratings. A decrease in perceived utilitarian value is likely to result in a more pronounced negative impact on satisfaction compared to a similar decline in hedonic value. Nevertheless, the emotional and interpersonal aspects of service, particularly comfort and staff interaction, remain essential for enhancing the overall guest experience. Therefore, hotels should pursue a balanced strategy that ensures consistent delivery of functional quality while also creating conditions that support positive emotional and interpersonal guest experiences

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the number of subcategories classified as utilitarian was larger than those classified as hedonic. Although the use of composite averages minimized the impact of this imbalance, the measurement structure may still affect the relative contribution of each value dimension. Second, the sample size of 63 hotels provides sufficient grounds for statistical inference, yet larger datasets would enhance the robustness and generalizability of the findings. Third, the research is context-specific, focusing exclusively on four-star hotels in the municipality of Varna, which limits the broader applicability of the conclusions. Future research could include hotels of different star categories, compare multiple destinations, or analyze ratings across several booking platforms to validate and extend the observed patterns.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the understanding of how perceived value shapes online hotel evaluations. It demonstrates that both utilitarian and hedonic dimensions are important determinants of customer satisfaction, with functional attributes showing a slightly stronger influence in this context. These insights expand existing knowledge on consumer behavior in hospitality and provide practical guidance for improving service quality and competitiveness in the digital marketplace.

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