The becoming of user-generated reviews: Looking at the past to understand the future of managing reputation in the travel sector

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Abstract

The emergence of User-Generated-Content (UGC) is challenging the equilibrium of reputation management practices prompting widespread change and organizational restructuring. Formal accreditation schemes mingle with less formal mechanisms which place users in the middle making them draw their own conclusions about products and services. This paper explores how UGC reviews and ratings have intensified the contingency of organizational reputation in the travel sector. The findings are based upon a corpus of data including: a field study at the offices of the largest travel user-generated website, TripAdvisor, and a netnographic approach. In particular we discuss the shift from Word-Of-Mouth to eWOM, the consequences for the sector and provide a balanced view of the role of reviews, ratings and lists. We are concluding with a conceptual model for managing online reputation in the era of UGC, while acknowledging the current process of transformation in reputation management.

Highlights

- UGC in travel places reputation management on the front line of everyday practices
- We propose a conceptual model to manage online reputation in the era of UGC
- Changes in rankings have had an impact on booking rates
- Managers must develop a thorough understanding of the nuances of reputation ratings
- In the era of UGC the offline and online worlds are entangled and inseparable

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Abstract

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Keywords
eWOM, reputation management, User-Generated-Content, reviews, rankings

1. Introduction

What do an Italian writer in his early seventies; a 23-year-old Scandinavian chef; a middle-aged Australian housewife and a Japanese student have in common? All of them have had a travel experience, which they felt they wanted to share with a community of people. All of them have written a review narrating how their different hotel expectations have been met or not and posted it on TripAdvisor. The writer wanted to share his experience at the hotel where he spent his golden anniversary: "…a knock on the door brought a silver tray of six small truffles and two glasses with a bottle of champagne". The chef shares with us that her free upgrade to the private 24th floor of the hotel in Boston where she stayed exceeded her expectations. The Japanese rushed to warn fellow travelers that half of the rooms in the hotel she chose in Malaga were facing an underground garden with noise and a terrible smell. The Australian shared her surprise when she found her favorite CD on the bedside-table after she had tweeted about missing her music collection while being away from home.

This diverse crowd is typical of the mosaic of people sharing experiences and allocating scores to hotels on rating/ranking travel websites. In this paper, we argue that the rapid growth of User-Generated-Content (UGC) in the travel sector places reputation management on the front line of everyday organizational life. We trace how the most popular UGC site, TripAdvisor, has developed from novel interloper to a routine and habitualized practice in the travel sector. By focusing on both defamatory and favorable review content, we provide a detailed analysis of the ways in which UGC is redefining the process of reputation management leading to widespread revision of practices on the ground and organizational restructuring. In so doing, we first respond to travel scholars, such as Dijkmans, Kerkhof and Beukeboom (2015) who note that social media activities in hospitality have received scant attention, as well as to reputation scholars who encourage academics and organizations to better understand the effects of Web 2.0 on corporate reputation (e.g. Van Norel, Kommers, Van Hoof and Verhoeven, 2014; Veil, Petrun and Roberts, 2012; Williams & Buttle, 2011). In particular, the research question

is formulated as follows: How have UGC reviews and ratings intensified the contingency of organizational reputation in the travel sector.

We will argue that websites hosting reviews and ratings open up communication channels with customers but also compel managers to come to terms with multiple reputation-making mechanisms. Based on findings from an extensive field study, we will propose a conceptual model to manage online reputation management as a way of conceptualizing the current process of transformation in reputation-making in the travel sector.

2. Theoretical Background

Accreditation schemes and ranking mechanisms serve as normalizing institutional forms designed to facilitate the flow of trade when we are confronted with unknown domains or a surplus of choices. Business magazines such as Forbes, BusinessWeek, Money, Smart Money and the Financial Times produce ranking lists to minimize uncertainty for prospective investors or graduate students. In the hospitality sector, the Michelin Red Guide is one of the oldest and most influential accreditation schemes for restaurants (Rao, Monin and Durand, 2003). Such certification contests are "social tests of products and organizations" (Rao, 1994) that minimize uncertainty and establish reputational standing. Although their standards are demanding, schemes managed by established institutions are designed as far as possible to achieve reputational symmetry through a "win-win" dynamic. This left a gap in the market for user-generated candid information services that circumvent the formal schemes and challenge the equilibrium of reputation management.

In what follows, we will introduce reputation management and will sketch the current literature on electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) in order to identify new challenges and tensions posed by UGC. We will argue that websites hosting anonymous reviews with undisclosed rating mechanisms open up communication channels with customers but also compel managers to come to terms with multiple grounds for reputation-building.

2.1 An introduction to Reputation Management

According to the most cited definition in the literature, "reputation has been defined as the perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describe the firm's overall appeal to all its key constituents when compared to other leading rivals" (Fombrun, 1996:p.72). Scholars from different fields mostly perceive reputation as a relational concept, whereby an external assessor is performing a conscious or unconscious evaluation of past performance in order to build impressions and construct their own idea of the firm's identity (Dimov *et al*, 2007; Fisher & Reuber, 2007; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Hall, 1992; Logsdon & Wartick, 1995). Reputations therefore act as safety nets; by developing their reputation firms can reduce stakeholders' uncertainty about their ability to create value (Rindova *et al*, 2007). In other words, reputation appears to be a fundamental extension of organizational credibility whereby stakeholders evaluate past actions and records of behavior.

A strong view within the reputation literature attempts to relate organizational reputation to financial performance. The causal relationship then would be: the more reputable a company is considered, the more profitable it is. Research has indicated that organizational reputation more than identity, culture or organizational image has a positive effect on financial performance (see Bergh *et al*, 2010; Dhalla & Carayannopoulos, 2013; Dowling, 2001; Fombrun, 1996; Podolny, 1993). Besides financial performance corporate reputation management is in general considered a fundamental aspect of business performance. For instance, Hall (1992) found that U.K. Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) ranked reputation as the most important among thirteen intangible resources (including culture, contracts, trade secrets, intellectual property rights etc.).

The main streams of literature on organizational reputation have shown its multidimensionality. In their study, Rindova *et al.* (2005) illustrate the relationship between reputation and performance by proposing that reputation consists of separate dimensions, namely "the extent to which stakeholders perceive an organization as being able to produce quality goods and the extent to which the organization is prominent in

the minds of stakeholders". Lange *et al* (2011) build on the stream of reputation research that emphasizes on the multiple dimensions and summarize the streams of reputation research in the management literature in order to overcome a phase marked by uncertainty about definitions and operationalizations. With this aim in mind, they identify three dominant conceptualizations/dimensions of reputation as:

1.   Being known
2.   Being known for something and
3.   Generalized favorability

The first category reflects the degree of awareness that perceivers hold. The second refers to a perceptual representation of the firm irrespective of judgment. The third, generalized favorability, views reputation as the evaluation of an aggregated whole which is socially constructed and immersed in a collectively acceptable social system. This latter category already implies the collective aspect of reputation, which is made manifest more clearly in the form of word of mouth (WOM).

2.2 From WOM to eWOM

The wide-ranging impact of word of mouth and the practice of sharing it online have intensified the need for organizations to systematically understand and exploit customers' opinions. Arndt (1967: p.190) was one of the first who studied the influence of WOM and defined it as "oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale". Two decades later, Westbrook (1987) defined WOM as the informal communication directed at other consumers about ownership, or characteristics of goods and services and their sellers.

Since then, many studies have been conducted with the aim to identify the relationships between informal communications and rumors and buying decisions. Research on traditional WOM has mostly focused on managerial, socio-psychological and economic aspects. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955/ 2006) conclude that WOM has been the most important source of influence in the purchase of household goods and food products.

Along these lines, scholars present evidence on how WOM has influenced purchase behaviors (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Lee & Youn, 2009; Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008). Brown and Reingen (1987) extend Granovetter's theory about strong and weak ties and identify the need to combine network analysis of WOM behavior with microlevel analysis at the individual level. Laczniak, DeCarlo and Ramaswami (2001) focus on the negative impact that WOM may have and they study how consumers respond to negative WOM with the use of attribution theory.

Within recent years, customers have become sophisticated users and search online for the unbiased, candid information that will guide them while taking decisions. In the travel sector in particular, Web 2.0 and Travel 2.0 have transformed travelers into knowledge consumers who apply the concept of social networking to the tourism industry (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Technology has been a major factor of importance with regards to how the travel experience has been shaped. Computer Reservation Systems, Global Distribution Systems, dynamic packaging, multimedia, mobile technologies, augmented reality and more recently wearable technologies and smart tourism have added new functionalities and expanded the possibilities in ways that contemporary travelers cannot imagine themselves without.

An integral part of Web 2.0 has been the dissemination of opinions and rumors online, what has been coined as eWOM. Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler, (2004) define eWOM as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet. Primary concerns of scholars studying eWOM, such as Gruen, Osmonbekov and Czaplewski (2006) and Gretzel & Yoo (2008) have been the motivations and the impact upon buying decisions. For instance Schindler and Bickart (2005) have identified three motives for seeking online WOM: an information input to purchase decisions, a desire for support and community and entertainment value.

At the beginning, the phenomenon of eWOM seemed like a simple transition of WOM into the web. Dellarocas (2003) for instance affirms this move by noting that electronic

reputation systems put traditional WOM networks on a much larger scale. Yet it has been proven a more powerful platform transforming the process of reputation management than a mere transition. Moving to the online environment has changed the power and nature of WOM, in terms of reach and scope as well as style, magnitude and culture. Litvin et al. (2008) in their comparison to physical WOM assert that it even created a new type of reality: "Far different from physical WOM, eWOM can create virtual relationships and communities with influence far beyond the readers and producers of WOM; it actually creates a new type of reality by influencing readers during their online information searches". It is therefore plausible to claim that if eWOM has not transformed the way we live, communicate, judge and experience everyday practices at a personal and organizational level, it has undeniably intruded into our lives.

2.3 eWOM in the form of UGC in travel

UGC in travel can vary from travel blogs and social networking sites to travel wikis and fora. Baka and Scott (2009) explain this variation; "these websites represent a conscious challenge to the imagination and creativity of their participants who may draw upon any form of media ranging from video, wikis, blogs, recommendations, social networking, fora, and message boards". In this paper UGC is mainly used to refer to reviews and interactions between users on travel recommendation websites, such as TripAdvisor. These sites multiply the power of eWOM at an exponential pace, as they widely disseminate WOM through recommendations and travelers' reviews (Shegg, Liebrich, Scaglione and Ahmad, 2008). In general, the degree of influence that different forms of UGC have is important, as UGC is where the opinion leaders of the digital age express themselves (Litvin et al., 2008).

As with any type of eWOM, both academics and practitioners have appreciated the impact of UGC. Travel and hospitality scholars have studied the complex relations UGC and especially online reviews have brought about since the emergence of the phenomenon. UG reviews have been extensively studied in relation to decision making

(Ayeh, Au, and Law, 2013, Cheng & Loi, 2014; Crotts, Mason, and Davis, 2009; Filieri & McLeay, 2013; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Jeong & Jang, 2011; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Sparks, Perkins, and Buckley, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). A number of scholars have noted the need for hotel professionals to actively manage and communicate with customers online (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Chaves, Gomes and Pedron, 2012; Leung, Law, van Hoof and Buhalis, 2013; Levy, Duan & Boo, 2013; Mauri & Minazzi, 2013; O'Connor, 2010) and they have examined the effects and implications of UGC in tourism (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Litvin et al., 2008; Zhang, Ye, Law and Li, 2010; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009), as well as the intentions to trust UG channels of information (Yang, Kim, Amblee, and Yeong, 2012; O'Connor, 2010). Among other issues scholars have investigated what motivates people to contribute content (Wilson, Murphy and Fierro, 2012), to which extent online reviews are related to reputation management strategies (Dijkmans et al., 2015, Levy et al., 2013), how credible anonymous online reviews are (Ayeh et al., 2013) and how they are used as a tool to express dissatisfaction (Gelb & Sundaram, 2002; Grönroos, 1988; Vásquez, 2011).

eWOM has put marketing and communication departments into a new era of "service recovery" as the process of dealing with complaints and their resolution has become public. Even though international regulatory bodies, such as the Office of Fair Trading in the UK or the ISO COPOLCO Committee, have existed for long time, UGC introduced a revised form of representation. This transition comes as no surprise as research has shown that consumers put more trust in fellow customers than in content provided by marketing agencies (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006; Kardon, 2007; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011). UGC thus introduces a different form of representation, which is arguably more akin to word-of-mouth.

More importantly though, the emergence of social media and eWOM in the travel sector has influenced traditional practices ranging from the dissemination of information to feedback management. Back in the 90s' Teletext services in the UK were extensively used by tour operators who wanted to inform consumers directly, without the

intervention of the travel agent (Palmer & Mayer, 1996). In 2015 channels like Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube have changed marketing practices such as gaining an audience and communicating campaigns, offers and news. On YouTube for instance, hotel managers can upload videos that highlight the facilities or the landscape and scenery and then embed those videos on their official websites.

On Facebook, hotel managers can diversify the hotel's account by enriching it with further functionalities like a booking engine widget (functionality that allows users to book directly through Facebook) or by including customized tags with benefits exclusive to the users of the particular channel. Other online tools range from accounts on social networking websites to inspired blogs, such as a blog with the theme "fancy hotel of the week". Blogs can become really powerful and big hotel chains have entered the blogosphere to create awareness and to keep up with loyal members.

Hotel marketing is therefore enriched as the online possibilities mature; yet the basic principles of providing quality service remain. Especially in the lodging sector the "welcoming" to the premises is one of the most important moments that hospitality is enacted. Ottenbacher (2007) notes the importance of "the expertise and enthusiasm of frontline staff" with regards to customer satisfaction. Many reviews on TripAdvisor also mention the welcoming. Comments like "we were warmly welcomed" are typical on the reviews website.

Moving on to guest feedback and its management, comment cards and surveys have been harbingers of online WOM. Whereas tracking and monitoring might have been tasks accomplished by hotel managers through reservation records, nowadays they have become automated. Hotel managers can use analytics to study where visitors come from and more importantly where they "go" after they interact with any initiative they introduce such as offers on their websites or exclusive discounts for Twitter followers. Being aware of the channels that bring more traffic and bookings, managers are informed about where to put emphasis. Table 1 summarizes the transformation of practices since the emergence of Social Media.

Traditional practices	Online practices in the era of Social Media
Guest Surveys and questionnaires to identify the best marketing channels	Online monitoring and tracking of traffic. (Where users are coming from and where they are going to after they interact with an initiative)
Performance measurement through "listening guest", focus groups, comments cards	Performance measurement using Google analytics, web analyzers and other sophisticated tools
Use of mass media for advertisement	Use of social media to advertise campaigns and offers
TV ads for exposure and Teletext services	YouTube channel to upload videos and highlight destinations
Small gifts with the hotel's logo printed, such as pens, lighters, mouse pads	Free widgets and screensavers that users can download and use (some of which allow direct booking)
Closed groups and mailing lists wits special benefits	Benefits exclusive to a channel's fans and followers (discounts for twitter fans or Facebook only), Blogging
Viral marketing, which lets visitors e-mail friends to suggest the site (via virtual postcards, referral buttons, and so forth)	Facebook like and share buttons and groups on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter etc.
Managing database communications and reservations to find more about customers	Relating information on various platforms to identify who the customers are (for instance TripAdvisor reviews with reservation records)
Monitoring customers' quality perceptions, evaluating departments' performance to reward employees and managers	Bonuses and promotions based on social media feedback
Peer inspections on site	User-generated "inspections"

Table 1. From traditional to online practices

Although research on online reviews and UGC in travel has been extensive, there is still long way to go towards designing an integrated reputation management strategy. Dijkmans et al., (2015) note the need by saying how surprising it is to see that the results of social media activities in hospitality have received scant attention in the academic literature. In line with this observation, Barsky and Frame (2009) have found

that 85% of hotels have no guidelines for monitoring and responding to online reviews and only 7% of hotels are responding to reviews even though 71% of people consider management responses as important (Revinate, 2011). Within the broader terrain of online reputation, Van Norel et al. (2014) note that hardly anything is known about the effects of eWOM on the reputation of a corporation, which is a similar assumption to this by Williams and Buttle (2011) who conclude that there is very little research on how organizations attempt to manage WOM. Veil et al. (2012) also encourage organizations to better understand the Web 2.0 environment and in particular the processes that are "already creating their reputation online". This study builds on the work of travel scholars and responds to the recent calls for a more extensive and systematized study on how eWOM is to be managed as a quintessential of reputation management.

3. Research Design

The current paper belongs to longitudinal research project. A multilevel methodology has been designed around a case study and a netnographic approach with a high-degree of active participation in UGC websites.

3.1 Case Study

Yin (2003: p.13) maintains that the case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". TripAdvisor has served as the unit of analysis with multiple identities embracing many groups of interest: millions of users-travelers that create content online, administrators of this content worldwide and hoteliers whose properties are reviewed and they can choose the degree of participation. Gaining access to TripAdvisor has been the most challenging part of the whole study. It took nearly two years and the researcher had to attend various practitioners' conferences to establish the relevant connections. Finally it was through the "Social Media Strategies for Travel, User-Generated-Content and Social Networking in Travel" conference, organized by EyeForTravel in San Francisco that the

doors opened when the executive managers from TripAdvisor who participated in the conference introduced the contact person in London. The project has been exclusively financed by the author and although TripAdvisor has been always cautious about what was to be revealed throughout the interviews and focus group, they did not ask to approve the transcripts or intervene in any way.

A total of 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted comprising interviews with TripAdvisor in their European offices in London (phase A) and at their headquarters in Boston (phase B) with the CEO and top-managers holding key positions or directing departments. All interviews lasted between 44 minutes and 1 ½ hour, followed a semi-structured format and have been recorded and transcribed (see table 2).

Characteristics of Case Study	Unit of Analysis	Data collection methods	Specificities
Single	TripAdvisor	Interviews	Location: TripAdvisor London
Descriptive with explanatory & exploratory nature		(Phase A)	Number of participants: 6 **(Managing Director, Director of Communications European Community Dir. Sales Dir., Spanish Community Manager Marketing Director)** Nature: Semi- structured Duration: 45- 55 min
		Group Discussion	Location: TripAdvsor London Number of participants: 4 **European Community Dir. Community Specialists (Germany, Italy, France)** Duration: 1h 31min

	Interviews (Phase B)	Location: TripAdvisor Boston **Number of participants: 4** (CEO and Co-Founder, VP of Partnerships, VP of site experience, Trade Relations Manager) **Nature: Semi- structured** **Duration: 44- 48 min**

Table 2. Case study specificities

3.2 Netnography

Kozinets (2002) proposes an adaptation of virtual ethnography, netnography, as a qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through Computer-Mediated-Communications. He maintains that in order to understand online groups and their needs or decisions, publicly available dialogues on fora and groups are used as evidence. In his book on Netnography, he clarifies the potential contribution of the method: "Netnography contributes by adding valuable interpretive insight, by building through careful focus and analysis, what is available publicly on the Internet into a known and respected body of codified knowledge" (Kozinets 2010:p.113). Thus, netnography is mainly conducted through participant observational research based on online fieldwork, whereby some degree of participation and interaction with the online space under study is assumed. Tourism scholars have adopted netnography in the recent years (Mkono, 2011; Woodside, Cruickshank, and Dehuang, 2007). However, as Mkono and Markwell (2014) note, it would be beneficial for the development of netnography if researchers moved beyond passive consumption of publicly available information to active participation. In responding to this call along with a general call by tourism scholars (e.g. Franklin & Crang, 2001; Ryan, 2005) highlighting the need for extending the methodological approaches of tourism research, we employed netnography along with the case study to examine in more depth the multiple identities of TripAdvisor and the interrelated groups.

The respondents who have been contacted via the netnographic approach include 21 hoteliers and hotel managers, 5 hostel owners, 4 travel bloggers, 2 travel community founders and 49 users, either members of the TripAdvisor community or travelers that have expressed a view about TripAdvisor online (see Table 3 for an analysis). The reasons for selecting them were based on their online engagement with TripAdvisor. The first active encounter with the TripAdvisor community started with the researcher creating a profile and adding a picture and travel tastes. To gain an understanding of the travel practice and the role UGC has played, Destination Experts[1] on TripAdvisor community have been approached through the personal messages platform. What followed the exchange of personal messages with selected users was an interview either on Skype or via e-mail. The quality and quantity of reviews, their replies to forum posts, the immediacy and their writing style have been observed prior to selecting them, as well as after the interviews. The everyday chance to get involved -directly or indirectly - bridged the gap imposed due to the absence of 'co-presence' and revealed insights about respondents' personality that would not be possible to gain in an hour of face-to-face interviews, sitting on opposing chairs and looking into each other's eyes. Participant observation remains a large part of cyber-ethnography (Ward, 1999) and in this study it has not been limited to TripAdvisor members.

TripAdvisor members were citizens of a broader online world with multiple identities and TripAdvisor was only one of the "places" they liked to gather. Social Networking sites, such as Facebook and a community called "Travel 2.0 - The Travel and Hospitality Social Network" were two additional 'fieldwork settings'. Groups called "Addicted to TripAdvisor" or "TripAdvisor fans" were the first Facebook groups to join, from which nineteen respondents have participated in the study mainly through Facebook messages and e-mails. Within such Facebook groups and similar ones such as

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[1] Destination experts are passionate travelers/users who contribute a substantive amount of posts and in many cases they check TripAdvisor messages more often than their e-mails.

"disappointed by TA", "TA guests from hell" etc., the researcher observed and participated in discussions and threads on various topics such as manipulation and trustworthiness of online reviews. Furthermore, websites, where people share their views about TripAdvisor, such as Helium.com and Viewpoints.com served as meta-review websites; providing users with reviews about the review site. Nine opinionated people out of the 49 travelers have been interviewed on those two sites [2] (see table 3 for a detailed description of participants).

Participants	Reasons of selecting them	Data collection methods	Number of participants	Field (where interactions took place)
Hoteliers & Hotel Managers	They actively respond to TA reviews or have mentioned on the web that TA has influenced them	Online Interviews (Email, Skype) Participant observation	21	E-mail, Skype Articles about their hotels/ public online interviews
Hostel owners	Have commented about TA on hostelforums.com	Online Interviews Participant observation	5	Hostelworld.com forum
Travel Bloggers & journalists	Have written about TA on their blogs	Skype Interviews Participant observation	4	E-mail, Skype Blog entries about TA
Other travel community founders		Online Interviews	2	E-mail, Skype
Users/ Travelers	Destination experts on TA, thus active members		15	TA PM platform
Users/ Travelers	Members of TA-related groups on FB	Online	19	Facebook and e-mail

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[2] Although all sources of data have informed the study, in this paper the views of travelers are not explicitly discussed.

		Interviews		
Users/ Travelers	Members of Helium community and Viewpoints.com with an article published about TA	Participant observation	9	E-mail Helium PM platform Helium published articles about TA Viewpoints Community
Users/ Travelers	Other travel Networks/ community members		4	PM within the networks and E-mail

Table 3 Netnography specificities

3.3 Coding and data analysis

The corpus of systematically gathered online netnography data was cross-referenced with data from the interviews and focus groups organized by TripAdvisor at their London and Boston offices. Data for cases cited in this paper have also been gathered from media-tracking (over 160 articles and blog entries in total). The corpus has been constructed following Bauer and Gaskell who define corpus construction as an "iterative process, where additional strata of people are added to the analysis until saturation is achieved" (2000: p.347). All interviews have been transcribed with the use of a free software package called Express Scribe and have been imported into Evernote, a software program that acted both as a web clipper as well as a data repository. The data analysis started with open coding, then categories have been classified into concepts, and at the final stage of the initial coding phase patterns emerged. After the first stage of coding, a more systematic thematic analysis was conducted. Following Attride-Stirling's (2001) coding techniques on how to build thematic networks, we produced four thematic networks with the use of Inspiration software. Although we did not formally draw on Toulmin's argumentation theory that thematic networks root in, we employed the organizing concepts. The theme that is the focus of this paper is the intensification of the contingency of organizational reputation since the emergence of UGC reviews and ratings. In the following section we present the empirical material.

4. Empirical Material

The empirical material that we draw upon to highlight the way that UGC is challenging existing reputation management strategies is from the largest online community, TripAdvisor.

4.1 The advent of TripAdvisor in reputation management

TripAdvisor is a public online space where people can anonymously share opinions about hotels, restaurants and attractions; a combination of click-button rating categories and user-generated free text. The click-button data is then used to rank hotels and produce a numerical list called the TripAdvisor "Popularity Index", along with lists of hotels under the heading of "best", "worst", or "dirtiest" in the world. In our interview in Boston, Steven Kaufer shared his story of how they started including user-generated-content before realizing that this would become the main and for long time sole focus of the site:

> We started when I was trying to plan a vacation with my wife and we got recommendations from travel agents. When I went to research those recommendations on the web they weren't as expected; really what I wanted to find on the web was what real travelers thought, honest opinions, the good the bad, the candid photos. It was very hard to do, it was easy to track down the hotel or the island but all you really got was official information and if you think about what a search engine tries to do they try to give you the most authoritative information, the official website of the hotel or island or city whatever. Really what I wanted wasn't the official information, I wanted the gossip, I wanted what the real travelers liked and didn't like.

> (Co-Founder & CEO, TripAdvisor)

What began as a portal with travel information has evolved into the largest user-generated review site in the travel sector with more than 340 million unique monthly visitors and over 225 million reviews and opinions. Its current status is so significant that many believe it is rapidly superseding formal sources of knowledge about travel and making traditional hotel accreditation schemes largely redundant. In 2011, UK tourism minister, John Penrose, announced that the official tourist board hotel star-rating system should be abandoned and industry websites, such as TripAdvisor would

complement any remaining traditional schemes. In an interview on the UK's Radio 4, Penrose said: "We would like to get people to use those websites rather more frequently, but also if the industry wants to carry on running a star-rating system off its own back that is absolutely fine as well" (Breaking Travel News, 2011).

Hotels ranked number one in their area on TripAdvisor's Popularity Index have found that their reservations have increased significantly. In a similar manner negative reviews discourage consumers from booking accommodation. However, hoteliers that receive negative reviews have found it difficult to manage the impact on their reputation. Furthermore, employees mentioned in the reviews are also accountable for their actions. The challenges and tensions that these issues create are illustrated below in a series of examples from our field study.

4.2 The assertion of the crowd in the professional lives of hoteliers

There is general recognition that UGC has revised the practice of reputation management, however in the travel sector this has become particularly acute as hotels discover they are providing 'infotainment' without realizing it. Hotels and restaurants are automatically listed on TripAdvisor and ranked without the owner's permission or in many cases without them being aware.

Hoteliers may post a management response in an effort to mitigate the points in a review, so long as it conforms to TripAdvisor's terms of use. Although this may sound straightforward, our data shows that establishing the basis for a legitimate review is a highly contested issue and the consequences for reputation management are critical. The "Gumbo Limbo Disaster" illustrates this point.
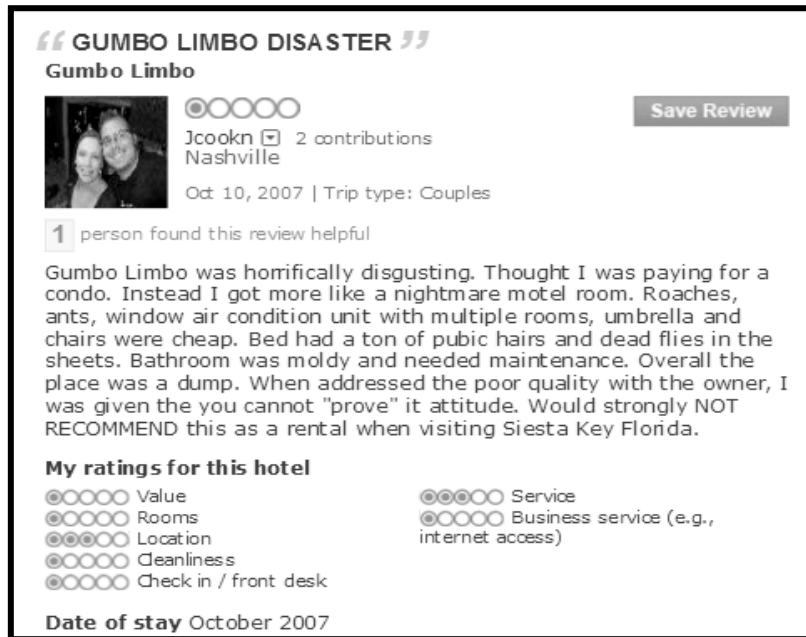
Figure 1. Post by a reviewer on TripAdvisor

This negative review, posted in 2007 by a TripAdvisor member, outraged the hotel proprietor who set about trying to identify the author in order to sue them for damage to reputation. Many hoteliers feel that comments of this kind cannot be mitigated by a simple 'management response' from them on TripAdvisor. They believe that some reviews move beyond the sphere of subjectivity and opinion into the realm of defamatory and legally unsubstantiated. Because reviews are anonymous, anyone can post with a pseudonym, regardless of whether they have really visited the property or not. In the face of criticism, TripAdvisor points to its verification procedures. As TripAdvisor team supports, there is a strict and thorough screening process of every single review in place to ensure quality and trustworthiness. TripAdvisor's Director of Communications Europe maintains,

> [f]ortunately on our site we have very strict controls, we invest a lot of money and time we have people reading each review to make sure its not defamatory, so strict controls are in place and I think that's the kind of day to day worries that show that what you are providing the consumer is good quality without compromising on the objectivity of the content.

(Director of Communications, TripAdvisor)

Irrespective of TripAdvisor's efforts, hoteliers are frustrated because as the manager in one of the major chains put it: "someone could go on to TripAdvisor and post a false comment, or a competitor and you have no way of having it removed". Online postings by small hotel owners about the effect of TripAdvisor on their business show the desperation and depth of feeling that is being generated. Some hotel owners are going beyond public statements to ask for justice when they feel reviews and online comments are fake and unfair. For example, Brook Barn Country House, "one of the top places to stay in Oxfordshire on Trivago, AA 5 stars and a 97% 'popularity ranking' on TripAdvisor" (Kwikchex, 2010) discovered that they had received a review from a visitor who felt that the owner was "racist" and recommended on TripAdvisor that "ethnics should stay away". The proprietor was furious maintaining that: "I can be brusque, I can be frosty, I can be all sorts of things, but I am not a racist". Her response was to call the police on the grounds that "it was an offence under the Public Order Act to stir up racial hatred, which is what this post did" (Skapinker, 2010). This particular post, as all others, could have stayed online and remain publicly associated with this establishment for as long as TripAdvisor kept it there.

Up until few years ago it was not only negative comments and reviews that frustrated hoteliers and restaurant owners, but also the lists that TripAdvisor distributed on a regular basis as newsletters claiming to reveal the "worst" or "dirtiest" hotels. Many hotels listed on TripAdvisor's list of "Dirtiest Hotels in the World" have considered suing TripAdvisor and the General Manager of Grand Resort Hotel & Convention actually sent TripAdvisor to Court. The TripAdvisor lists have set up a tension between official cleanliness standards – some of the hotels on their list of Dirtiest Hotels had recently passed formal inspection - and the claims laid out in traveler reviews.

TripAdvisor fuelled further discontent among hoteliers by publishing a list with the title: "Don't go there: Hotel Horror Stories!" Among the reviews published in these newsletters were ones with titles such as: "Still in Shock", "The Worst!", "Worst hotel ever wouldn't stay here if it was free…", "Do not stay here!", "Harassed by male staff", "I would have rather died". All very strong assertions that walked the line between

opinions, warnings and accusations, yet still selected by TripAdvisor for inclusion in their newsletter creating a wave of strong responses from hoteliers.
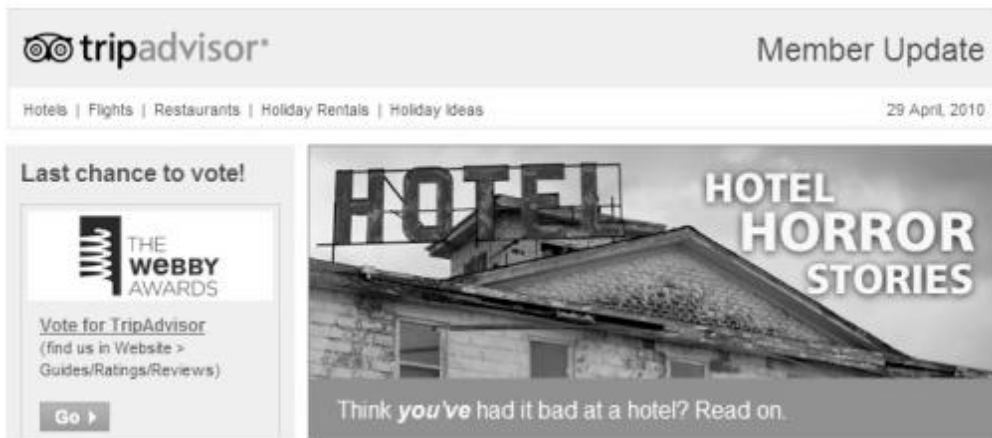
Figure 2. Part of a Newsletter TripAdvisor sent in 2010

Many hotel managers accept that they have to come to terms with alternative platforms for reputation management. However TripAdvisor is more than an additional marketing channel, it throws hoteliers into a dynamic process of reputation building and rebuilding. Part of the situation is that the style in which traveler reviews communicate their experiences and attempt to 'helpfully advise' fellow travelers how to avoid similar unpleasantness is more colorful and descriptive than any management response could afford to be. For example, one of the reviews included in the TripAdvisor Newsletter describes a scene in which fights are taking place at the hotel with a comment saying that the reviewer would have been "better off joining the Army and going to Afghanistan because he would have been safer and enjoyed better food."

This review would understandably disturb any reader however this has to be mitigated by sober recognition that its source is not part of any official tourist board or brochure distributed by the hotel group but instead essentially hearsay and eWOM posted online by a guest who visited the hotel or claims to have done so. It cannot wholly be regarded as legitimate without significant research into the source of the review, matched to records of those guests in residence during the period under scrutiny and so on so forth;

a research process that no regular user reading the reviews is likely to undertake before drawing his or her own conclusions about the reputation of this hotel.

The process of proving that a review is inaccurate can be arduous and in many instances managers say they feel like criminals defending their business in court. The tension between established reputation standings and online reviews is made manifest, especially when user-generated-content is placed alongside formal accreditation schemes and information from hoteliers. In the end what and who is held to be legitimate remains a highly contested issue. In many instances the shift between official and unofficial is evident.

In one of such reviews the guest claims the bed in their room was infested with bed bugs. A dispute started between the guest and the manager who denied that there were insects in the room. The hotelier posted a management response asserting that the hotel had passed Rentokil checks and no evidence of bed bugs was found also adding that the hotel had been inspected by the Environmental Health Authority who gave it a 5 star rating for hygiene management.

As hotel managers wrestle to prove or disprove reviews, the dynamic nature of user-generated websites, such as TripAdvisor has made verification processes problematic and has challenged the role of formal, professional authorities who have until now been used to having the final word. In the case above, the Environmental Health Authority and the official report by Rentokill are held in uncomfortable tension with the word of a guest. The mere mention of insect infestation on a widely used review site like TripAdvisor sets in motion a cycle of reputational uncertainty – whether it is true or not.

4.3 User-Generated reviews as a weapon to enhance reputation

At the other end of the spectrum, hotel managers have incorporated TripAdvisor and other social media in their day-to-day practices and in many cases they have even been using it as a reputational achievement. Many participants in the study associate their official website with their listing on TripAdvisor by adding links to it or badges demonstrating how well they are doing. These reputational signposts can be easily

downloaded from TripAdvisor's Owner Center and embedded on the official webpage at no cost. In case they choose to include them, hoteliers rush to inform the traveler audience that TripAdvisor has rated them number one in their region.

A further option is this of adding a dynamic widget which echoes the ranking given by TripAdvisor in a chronological order (most recent on the top). TripAdvisor has also designed guest cards that hoteliers can print out and physically distribute among guests. By doing so, hotel managers are encouraging customers to use the platform of TripAdvisor rather than asking them directly for feedback and therefore indicating that they would rather have their customers speak publicly as opposed to the limited borders of the premises. Such an encouragement is illustrative of the impact of TripAdvisor and how practices have evolved over time.

As with any other reputational indicator, hoteliers participated in the study have confirmed the commonsensical assumption that changes in rankings have had an impact on booking rates, which in turn forces them to adapt their practices accordingly. In this study, we have worked with hoteliers and found that although direct cause and effect relationships are problematic at times, we can certainly say that closer relationships are forming. A hotel general manager in Mexico shared his everyday routine, part of which has become the engagement with TripAdvisor. He explained that every staff meeting starts with commenting on the reviews so that to applaud efficient performance and to come up with strategies when the reviews are not favorable. He has even created an Excel spreadsheet where he and his team input every single review and filter them according to themes that appear in reviews (breakfast, sleeping quality, swimming etc.). The hotel manager and his team periodically produce correlations between the rankings on TripAdvisor and the conversion rates (booking outcomes). They even compare these against competitor data, a task that has become feasible in the Owner's Centre on TripAdvisor's website. He gives his account on how he started practicing TripAdvisor; in the beginning it was an experimentation which then became part of the routine:

> Once my marketing director brought the reviews to my attention, we
> quickly began to look for ways to change the customer perception of our

rock solid mattresses, which seemed to be the main complaint of the review entries. Of course, I naively thought that after changing 1/3rd of the property's mattresses would begin to bring the perception around, however, after moving forward with the project of changing out the mattresses, I found that this was not true! We then began to look further into how to use this Customer Relationship Management tool to change the potential customer perception, since it seemed that we could have placed marshmallow mattresses, and the pre-conceived notion was that our mattresses were hard (and I do admit, the previous mattresses were). We finally found the Management Review option and this is how the dynamic engagement with TripAdvisor began. We realize that in effect, our Management responses will not really affect the actual guest who commented, but rather provide "responsibility" and a response for potential future guests.

(General Manager of a hotel in Mexico)

The engagement with what TripAdvisor introduced has had a traceable impact in his case. In the quotation that follows he shows the correlation between the ranking on TA and the occupancy rate at the hotel: The higher the score (and hence the ranking) the higher the occupancies.

We monitor TA and other review websites daily for any updates, as well as rely on their own TA management tools (recently established) in order to determine the need for Management response. In general, our methods have been to respond to a trend of negative comments and address any issues. Additionally, when we detected a negative trend, we initially tried to respond on a POSITIVE review, to draw more attention to the positive review, while addressing our awareness and attention to the negative issues. Recently, since our review pool is weighted more heavily on the positive side, we are more apt to respond to any Negative review directly"…When we began the process, we were #14 in Los Cabos, and now we have achieved #8, and #1 amongst families", says the general manager and he continues, 2006 was the year with the highest reviews scores ever since then it drops back and I can tell you that this is reflected in occupancies too.

(General Manager of a hotel in Mexico)

This is a pattern that TripAdvisor's managers confirm in the interviews as well as in their public presentations at specialist conferences, where they encourage hoteliers to

actively monitor reviews and maximize the advantages. For example the specialist of TripAdvisor for the Spanish version of TripAdvisor said:

> We have owners saying: Hi, I have discovered we are on TA and we have reviews, 2 of them are normal and others good and I wanted to thank you because now I realize why I've got 20% increase in my bookings for this summer season. And then also get these reviews down because my bookings have decreased 20%.

The Director of Communication in TripAdvisor further comments on the impact of reviews:

> We have studies that we've taken from Forrester and various other analysts, showing how people trust more other peoples' opinions and therefore they are more willing to make a purchase decision on those other peoples' opinions. We work for example with a UK tour operator and they see that when there are our reviews on their site the conversion of people wanting to book that particular hotel has been 200% more than if there weren't any reviews there. So it does influence people.

They even go as far to mention examples of such a positive impact that the hotelier was overbooked. The Director of Sales notes:

> What we do know is the better ranking it has and the better brand generally it seems they get more business from us, so what is imperative to be a well-known company and then obviously deliver a good experience so effectively lot of that comes from the marketing by the company and put the product across in the right way.

And he goes on with an illustrative example:

> There was one hotel in America which was on the top hotels annual award last year and the director wrote to us saying it was amazing but he was booked out for about a year and a half and he said please I've got so many bookings now I don't know what to do with them. So we've had some great feedback in that sense.
>
> (Sales Director, TripAdvisor)

UG reviews have had an impact on performance in the case of hostels too. "It´s obvious that hostels with good reviews are the most popular ones", says a hostel owner. "We know that being the highest rated hostel on hostelworld.com for example, puts us on the top of the list when people are searching for accommodations in our market", notes

another hostel owner.

On the one hand TripAdvisor is presented as an opportunity and on the other as a threat. Owners feel empowered, yet at times "at TripAdvisor's mercy", as a hostel owner said, expressing what many tended to think loudly and some still do silently. Users of TripAdvisor have the power to temporarily damage reputations and even put hotels out of business, especially small privately owned hotels and B&Bs that do not have the luxury to engage with Travel 2.0.

Part of reputation-making thus has become the online confession as entangled with the everyday practices, such as the replacement of the mattress in the example mentioned earlier. The Sales Manager of TripAdvisor claims that the procedure of managing reputation is similar to how it used to be, yet the way it is accomplished and its impact on performance differ.

> What we advise is just to be incredibly open, don't try to create an online argument, if the consumer says there has been a problem then in all likelihood there probably was. Well, I think a hotel is really the best place to do it and in reputation management that is what the general manager does every single day of the week when interacting with the consumer. So we really advise just take that thought process and bring it online: imagine this in front of the lobby and act as if you are talking to that person about the problem, just solve it in exactly the same way.

(Sales Director, TripAdvisor)

Hotel managers are incorporating the task of checking their hotel on TripAdvisor as part of their everyday routine. Major hotel brands have established new strategies designed to respond to potential reputation crises triggered by TripAdvisor ranking and reviews.

The examples from our field study described above illustrate the conflicts and dilemmas motivating our call to extend the discussion of reputation-making in the context of UGC. Negative reviews present TripAdvisor users with a story that has no mitigating circumstances – many of the worst reviews above did not have a management response posted alongside them at the time this paper was written. The advice of most reputation professionals is to engage with UGC in order to turn the potential reputational "dead

end" created by negative reviews into a more active, on-going and managed process. On the other hand, hotel managers narrate how they have been using TripAdvisor as a tool to boost their reputational impact. Based on the multilevel empirical material, in what follows we are proposing a reputation management model for hospitality professionals.

5   Proposed Model

Fombrun in an article of 2007 on Corporate Reputation Ratings proposes specific steps for reputation tracking in the era of lists and rankings. The author claims that to manage corporate reputation effectively, managers must develop a thorough understanding of the relative importance of the different reputation ratings and lists. The steps as proposed by Fombrun are:

- Identification of the reputation landscape
- Assessment of changes in the company's ratings and rankings over time
- Comparison against industry competitors
- Ascertainment of publication reach
- Readership and reviewing of ranking methodologies

The conceptual model we are proposing here takes all actors' inputs into account and converts Fombrun's steps into a conceptual model for online reputation management in tourism, acknowledging though the processual and emergent nature of reputation making.

5.1 Identifying the reputation landscape in the era of UGC

In order to manage eWOM and reputation, a prerequisite would be to be fully aware of what is being said and written at any time. Free tools are at managers' hands like Google Analytics or Google alerts, as well as a wide range of more sophisticated reputation-making tools (see Hasan, Morris and Probets, 2009; Plaza, 2011 for academic articles on the use of Google Analytics). ReviewPro is one of the commercial web based analytics tools, which among other tasks aggregates content from more than 90 review websites and produces "The Global Review Index (GRI)". This is a

proprietary algorithm that performs a quantitative analysis based on the scores that a hotel receives across the 90 review sites.

Many tourism professionals have installed similar web analyzer programs to perform a variety of tasks such as simple statistics: number of visitors, page views per visitor, average page visit duration, popular pages and more (Plaza, 2011). A hotel manager from Kerzner International Resorts said to journalist Sarah Nassauer from the Wall Street Journal that online monitoring has entered a 24-hour cycle: "Headquarters' staff, hotel employees and top executives already monitor the company's Facebook pages and online reviews as part of their jobs. The company also hired StepChange to work on strategy and fill in gaps, such as monitoring middle-of-the-night missives". Participants in the study mentioned also the systematic use of Excel spreadsheets in producing review analytics. Although the focus of the study and fieldwork is TripAdvisor reviews, identifying the broader landscape would entail a systematic monitoring of all sites Travel 2.0 is made manifest including review sites, Online Travel Agents and social media (e.g. Yelp, HolidayCheck, Google reviews, booking.com, Expedia, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, FourSquare, Pinterest, YouTube, Flickr etc.)

5.2 Assessing changes in rankings over time and ascertaining publication reach in the era of UGC

All actors who participated in the study, including hostel owners, have realized that reputation is nothing static or an asset that is owned by the organization. It rather changes constantly, especially when it comes to the ephemeral nature of rankings and lists. The aforementioned tools also act as monitoring mechanisms of these changes. On TripAdvisor's Owner Centre managers can also access customized Google analytics data (see figure 3). It is also useful for managers to know how TripAdvisor motivates travelers to contribute content (for instance, basic gamification techniques like badges and newsletters inform users about the impact of their reviews, see figure 4). Managers' responses are attached to users' reviews and hence publication reach for travelers means publication reach for hotel managers too.

Figure 3. Customized analytics on how travelers engage with reviews

Figure 4. An illustration of how TripAdvisor engages users in contributing content

5.3 Comparing against industry competitors in the era of UGC

The hotel manager in Mexico, as well as many participants in the study have been producing correlations between the rankings on TripAdvisor and the conversion rates. They also compare these against competitor data, a task that can be accomplished in the Owner's Centre on TripAdvisor's website. Hotel managers can compare analytics against their competitors' in the region as part of a more systematic benchmarking analysis. Over the years TripAdvisor has introduced a wide range of tools for hoteliers and has repositioned itself and its business model (see figure 5). A range of snippets and widgets can be embedded on the official websites towards providing a balance between official and unofficial content (see figure 6).

Figures 5 and 6. TripAdvisor tools at hoteliers' hands

5.4 Reviewing ranking methodologies in the era of UGC

Deloitte suggests sophisticated methods to validate and risk-assess UGC such as algorithms, data-mining tools, and rules-based analysis (Ayeh et al., 2013). The official position of TripAdvisor on how their algorithms work, is that in order to maintain a proprietary hold on the algorithm and avoid gaming by businesses, they do not disclose details about how properties are ranked. Much electronic ink has been spilled by bloggers and travel writers on guessing how the system works and especially on spotting grey areas of the mysterious algorithm. TripAdvisor's Vice President of user experience explained about the principles during our interview, yet without entering into the specifics of how they identify fraudulent behavior:

> On the review front, what our goal is if not our method of achieving it is to ensure that the content is produced by an actual user who has had an actual travel experience at the place that they claim to have had it and at the same time although we never edit content, we never change anything that someone submitted so its pretty binary its either can be published on the site or cannot be published, but we never make editorial suggestions because its really UG, we are not an editorial operation…

> We do reject reviews when its something not friendly or its not relevant to the place they went to or if its defamation of some people specifically or if it has commercial links in it trying to market consumers to do or not do some specific commercial activity. On the sort of fraud side of thing we don't really go into any description cause going into any description is describing the way, the way that we ensure it is authentic is the very thing that gives us sort of a competitive advantage, we don't discuss it.

> (Vice President of User Experience, TripAdvisor)

Even though TripAdvisor's fraud detection algorithm is purported to detect fake reviews the issue of manipulation has become a problem. Recognition that the performance of a hotel on TripAdvisor can impact revenue has not only prompted informal attempts to manipulate rankings but also inspired business opportunities and the creation of new job descriptions. Although in the early days there was no corrective mechanism in place, nowadays hoteliers can contact TripAdvisor or post on the business forum if they suspect fraudulent behavior, well before any dispute is sent to court.

5.5 Increasing reputational scores in the era of UGC

This step comes as an addition to Fombrun's model and although it may sound too generic, specific steps can be followed to increase reputational standing. We could say that what has been transformed by degree in the era of UGC is the way hotel managers and hospitality professionals accommodate guests' needs in order to exceed expectations in a way that will encourage them to share their experience. The old generation would say that good service always exceeds expectations; it does not need to be contrived. The online channels have allowed the spread of the word at an exponential pace that was unimaginable a decade ago. Good service has always been the priority, but now "the secret is to make guests share their superb experience with the rest of the world", says the owner and General Manager of a lodge in Livingstone (ranked as number one out of 13 in the area) during our online interview. The change compared to the pre-UGC phase then lies in preparing the grounds to ensure that the exceptional service is recognized. A traveler can press the "like" button on Facebook (connecting potentially 100s of acquaintances) which directs to the review on TripAdvisor without having to telephone their friends. The information is there and can be easily read, may be Facebook, or a Twitter sentence like "service at Sheraton NY was fabulous", or stunning pictures on Flickr with tags that will bring the hotel at the top of the search engine's results.

Along these lines, encouraging guests to write reviews is in accordance with TripAdvisor's rules. Widgets can be downloaded from the Owners Center and sent in a follow up e-mail, or cards can be distributed at the reception upon check-out (see figures 7 and 8).

Encourage reviews on your own website

Make it easy for guests to review your business on TripAdvisor by placing one of these free widgets on your site

Upload a widget in two simple steps:

- **Step 1:** Select your preferred widget
- **Step 2:** Customize your widget and upload the widget code to your site

Full Review Form
Allow travelers to write a review of your business — without ever leaving your website!

Select

Large Review
Let visitors start their review on your site before sending them to TripAdvisor.

See it in use

Select

Medium Review
Direct visitors to TripAdvisor to write a review about your property.

See it in use

Select

Small Review
Use this small widget to encourage guest reviews.

See it in use

Select

Figure 7. Encouraging reviews online
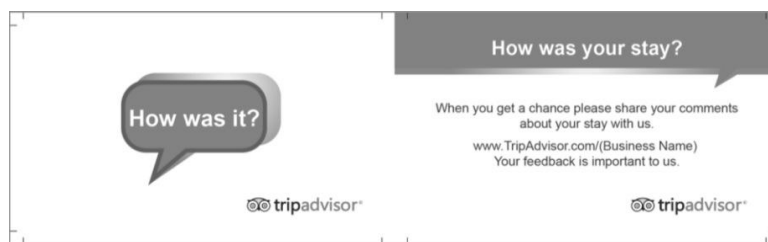
Figure 8. TripAdvisor guest card, encouraging reviews offline

More importantly, hotel managers need to realize that TripAdvisor and UGC can potentially act as corrective mechanisms, a relatively inexpensive 'focus group' and in the end of the day an opportunity for change and improvement. Participants in the study explained how their day starts with internal meetings during which members of staff reflect upon reviews, discuss what went wrong and decide how to tackle the issues mentioned, as well as manage the online responses. Even though offline and online actions seem to be different, hotel managers need to realize that in the era of UGC the

offline and online worlds are entangled and inseparable. In figure 9 a depiction of the proposed model is presented.
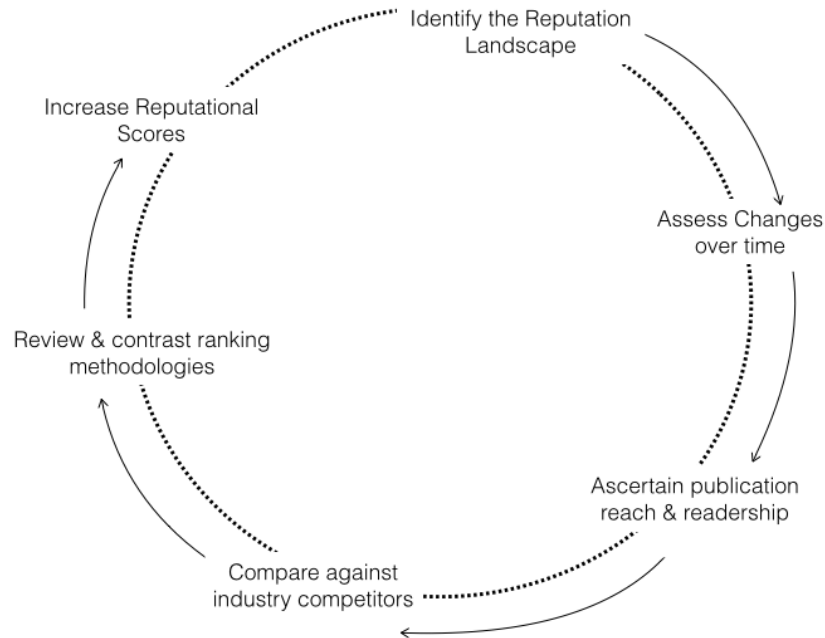
Figure 9: A conceptual model towards managing online reputation, inspired by Fombrun and adapted in the context of UGC

6 Conclusions & Further work

In this paper we have presented findings from a field study focused on the travel sector's largest user-generated online reviews website, TripAdvisor. The dynamism of UGC has forced hoteliers to design organizational strategies of continual vigilance and monitor UGC. After initially rejecting TripAdvisor, most hoteliers recognize that now 'Pandora's box' is open and they need to work out what this means for their organization and learn how to manage it as part of their work life. New organizational units and roles are emerging focusing on configuring organizational identity, reputation production and impression management. The emergence of such an informal platform has been redefining how reputation is to be managed. Whereas the ephemerality of hotel's reputable standing over time is widely recognized - made or broken by practices

constituting its daily performance - the advent of UGC has shaken the foundations of the professionally defined notion of reputation management and transformed it into a more intensely dynamic process.

At the center of our discussion are both negative and positive instances, as well as how travel businesses manage them. We have proposed a conceptual model to manage online reputation in the era of UGC to convey the necessity of systematically readapting practices and strategies. Our study provides theoretical and managerial insights into a balanced view of UGC reviews and the ways in which they can be managed.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The emergence of UGC and social media has forced reputation management scholars to revisit the notions of reputation and WOM. Although reputation has been mainly conceptualized as an intangible organizational asset tightly coupled with performance, it has been also recognized that social media as a category under reputation management umbrella deserves distinctive attention if we are to understand the way reputations are made or broken online. The general public or in other words the crowd has been empowered more than ever before to create realities, rather than to simply influence them. Van Norel et al. (2014) note that hardly anything is known about the effects of eWOM on the reputation of a corporation and Williams & Buttle (2011) conclude that there is very little research on how organizations attempt to manage WOM. In responding to reputation scholars who have noted the need to design an integrated reputation management strategy this study contributes a conceptual model that combines theory and action.

Through this model reputation is perceived as an ongoing cyclical process that consists of manageable moments: identifying the reputation landscape, assessing changes in ratings and rankings over time and ascertaining publication reach, comparing against competition, reviewing of ranking methodologies and increasing reputational scores. These moments do not happen in a linear or sequential way but are always entangled in practice. The study concludes that irrespective of how organizations have initially

responded to the powerful medium of UGC, they have acknowledged that treating it as an alternative to traditional WOM would be a serious misconception, as social media affords its own unique set of opportunities and threats.

Not only do social media and UGC reviews serve as platforms where external assessors have the opportunity to perform evaluations about organizations, but they have also become platforms where truth is negotiated in a public 'online court'. More importantly though, the intensification of the process of reputation making has been associated with what we may call 'the potential of transformation', in that UGC reviews make and remake reputations through both crowd's contributions as well as organizational responses. Thus negative comments can be potentially converted into positive if organizations engage with the nuances of the revised service recovery and in a similar manner positive comments can have no effect if organizations do not incorporate them into a broader learning process. This study shows how participants have experienced positive and negative reviews and invites reputation scholars to further work out how revised practices of reputation management are to be integrated into organizational agendas.

6.2 Managerial Implications

The results of social media activities in hospitality have received scant attention (Dijkmans et al., 2015), while recent reports conclude that 85% of hotels have no guidelines for monitoring and responding to online reviews and only 7% of hotels are responding to reviews even though 71% of people consider management responses as important (Revinate, 2011). Although travel and hospitality professionals are technologically advanced and the sector can be proud of major technological milestones, there is still long way to go towards fully incorporating eWOM into the business strategy.

The empirical material suggests that a systematic management of reputation is being worked out on multiple levels. On the one hand, hoteliers have to come to terms with the new situation; rather than privately speaking to the manager in the hotel lobby and

giving them the opportunity to address a complaint, guests go directly to TripAdvisor and post a negative review in a public space. An incident that, in the past, might have led to a telephone call, letter or local press conference now occurs online, in real time, in a global chat room called TripAdvisor. The content generated on TripAdvisor's website has transformed reputation into a highly contested issue with critical implications. Reviews have provided the basis for travelers to draw conclusions about hotels' legitimacy and reputation.

Based on our findings, the proposed model integrates different perspectives from various stakeholders and can be adopted by hotel managers and other travel professionals. A combination of online and physical practices is suggested, such as ways to monitor online impressions with the use of free or advanced tools, web analyzer programs and data-mining tools, ways to systematically correlate reviews and conversion rates, benchmarking practices, gamification techniques, proactive engagement with social media as well as reactive practices. The most important insight though is the realization that managing reputation is a continuous process above and beyond the segregation between online and offline and it has to be treated as such by merging reputation management practices.

We maintain that -in light of its growing status in the travel sector- the route to reputation standing for hoteliers necessarily entails relationships to and with TripAdvisor and other eWOM websites. This is an area that needs further exploration with practitioners and academics alike charged with working out how revised practices of reputation management will integrate the emerging online norms, values, beliefs about whether and who is accountable for what is 'written' online when those discourses have important consequences for organizational reputation.

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Tables

Table 1. From traditional to online practices

Traditional practices	Online practices in the era of Social Media
Guest Surveys and questionnaires to identify the best marketing channels	Online monitoring and tracking of traffic. (Where users are coming from and where they are going to after they interact with an initiative)
Performance measurement through "listening guest", focus groups, comments cards	Performance measurement using Google analytics, web analyzers and other sophisticated tools
Use of mass media for advertisement	Use of social media to advertise campaigns and offers
TV ads for exposure and Teletext services	YouTube channel to upload videos and highlight destinations
Small gifts with the hotel's logo printed, such as pens, lighters, mouse pads	Free widgets and screensavers that users can download and use (some of which allow direct booking)
Closed groups and mailing lists wits special benefits	Benefits exclusive to a channel's fans and followers (discounts for twitter fans or Facebook only), Blogging
Viral marketing, which lets visitors e-mail friends to suggest the site (via virtual postcards, referral buttons, and so forth)	Facebook like and share buttons and groups on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter etc.
Managing database communications and reservations to find more about customers	Relating information on various platforms to identify who the customers are (for instance TripAdvisor reviews with reservation records)
Monitoring customers' quality perceptions, evaluating departments' performance to reward employees and managers	Bonuses and promotions based on social media feedback
Peer inspections on site	User-generated "inspections"

Table 2. Case study specificities

Characteristics of Case Study	Unit of Analysis	Data collection methods	Specificities
Single	TripAdvisor	Interviews (Phase A)	Location: TripAdvisor London Number of participants: 6 **(Managing Director, Director of Communications European Community Dir. Sales Dir., Spanish Community Manager Marketing Director)** Nature: Semi- structured Duration: 45- 55 min
Descriptive with explanatory & exploratory nature			
		Group Discussion	Location: TripAdvsor London Number of participants: 4 **European Community Dir. Community Specialists (Germany, Italy, France)** Duration: 1h 31min
		Interviews (Phase B)	Location: TripAdvisor Boston **Number of participants: 4** (CEO and Co-Founder, VP of Partnerships, VP of site experience, Trade Relations Manager) **Nature: Semi- structured** **Duration: 44- 48 min**

Table 3 Netnography specificities

Participants	Reasons of selecting them	Data collection methods	Number of participants	Field (where interactions took place)
Hoteliers & Hotel Managers	They actively respond to TA reviews or have mentioned on the web that TA has influenced them	Online Interviews (Email, Skype) Participant observation	21	E-mail, Skype Articles about their hotels/ public online interviews
Hostel owners	Have commented about TA on hostelforums.com	Online Interviews Participant observation	5	Hostelworld.com forum
Travel Bloggers & journalists	Have written about TA on their blogs	Skype Interviews Participant observation	4	E-mail, Skype Blog entries about TA
Other travel community founders		Online Interviews	2	E-mail, Skype
Users/ Travelers	Destination experts on TA, thus active members		15	TA PM platform
Users/ Travelers	Members of TA-related groups on FB	Online Interviews	19	Facebook and e-mail
Users/ Travelers	Members of Helium community and Viewpoints.com with an article published about TA	Participant observation	9	E-mail Helium PM platform Helium published articles about TA Viewpoints Community
Users/ Travelers	Travel Networks/ community members		4	PM within the networks and E-mail

Figures

Figure 1. Post by a reviewer on TripAdvisor

Figure 2. Part of a Newsletter TripAdvisor sent in 2010

Traveler Engagement
Available exclusively to Business Listings subscribers

Last updated December 7, 2014

Visits to your property page: Since November 03, 2014 ⓘ

TIMEFRAME: LAST MONTH ⇕

Desktop & Tablet ☑   Mobile ☑

15k

5k

NOV 3 - NOV 9   NOV 10 - NOV 16   NOV 17 - NOV 23   NOV 24 - NOV 30   DEC 1 - DEC 7
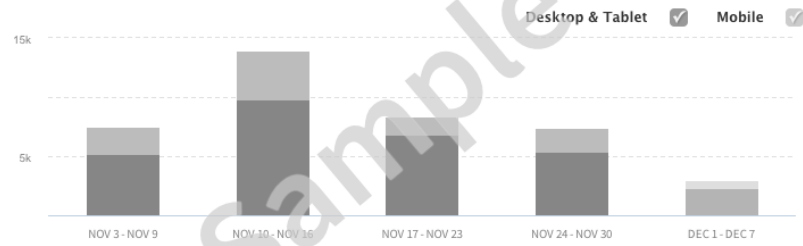
Last updated December 7, 2014

Traveler Engagement: Since November 03, 2014

TIMEFRAME: LAST MONTH ⇕

24,754 ⊙
20% ↑ vs. last month

Times your property was featured
in desktop searches ⓘ

12,754 ⊙
5% ↑ vs. last month

Times your property was featured
in mobile searches ⓘ

26 ⊡
15% ↑ vs. last month

Traveler Reviews
ⓘ

13,870 ⊡
-13% ↓ vs. last month

Travelers actively exploring your
property photos ⓘ

12 ⊡
59 total

Uploaded traveler photos of your
property ⓘ

18,754 ⊙
20% ↑ vs. last month

Times your Special Offer appeared
on TripAdvisor ⓘ

Figure 3. Customized analytics on how travelers engage with reviews

You have 23,754 readers. Impressive!
          did you realize how many travelers you've guided with your good advice?
Keep going... even reviewing places near home can be a big help to people
planning a visit to your town.

Figure 4. An illustration of how TripAdvisor engages users in contributing content

Figures 5 and 6. TripAdvisor tools at hoteliers' hands

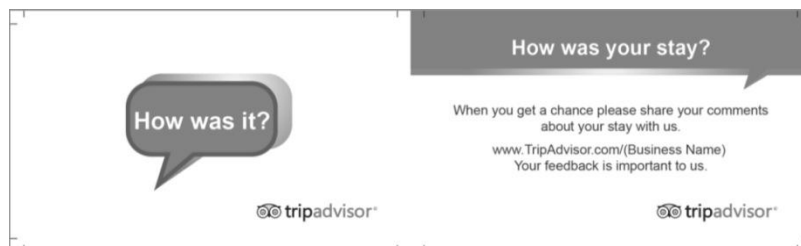Figure 7. Encouraging reviews online

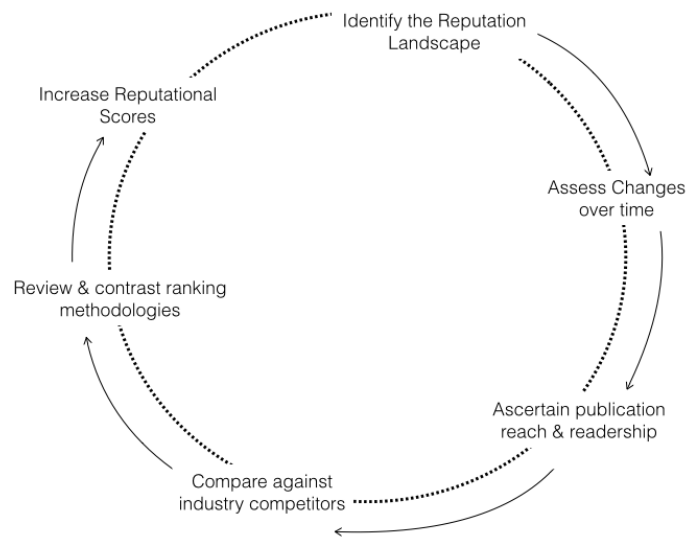
Figure 8. TripAdvisor guest card, encouraging reviews offline

Figure 9: A conceptual model towards managing online reputation, inspired by Fombrun and adapted in the context of UGC

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Author's Biography

Vasiliki Baka holds a Ph.D. in Information Systems from the Information Systems and Innovation Group, Department of Management, London School of Economics and Political Science, and is currently an assistant professor at the Technologies in Practice Group, IT University of Copenhagen. She is interested in organizational reputation managing practices, place-making, process philosophy and most recently in social collaboration platforms and their potential in developing countries.

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