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## Accommodation Information Search: the Perceived Value of Reading Online Reviews

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### Abstract

*Previous research studied the impact that accommodation online reviews have on those reading them. However, this is mainly quantitative and lacks of conceptual frameworks to ensure consistency. Additionally, only a few of these have considered influencing variables (i.e. characteristics of the review and the reader, and surrounding circumstances). This study will focus on online reviews about accommodation establishments. Its aim is to gain an understanding of the value of reading accommodation online reviews, through a qualitative study. A conceptual framework, based on consumer-perceived value theory, has been developed and face-to-face interviews with readers of accommodation online review have been undertaken. The results suggest that the value of reviews is primarily epistemic (fulfilling the curiosity of those reading them) and conditional (depending on the circumstances), as well as partially functional (related to the provision of effective and efficient information to support decision-making). However, limited emotional (i.e. fun) and social value (i.e. providing a feeling of belonging) have been reported. Furthermore, the elements eliciting the different value dimensions and variables influencing these (such as information search patterns) were identified.*

**Keywords:** *Online reviews, Accommodation and ICT, eTourism, Consumer-perceived value.*

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### JEL Classification:

### 1. Introduction

Extant research suggests that social media (social networking sites, consumer review sites, content community sites, wikis, Internet forums and location-based social media) makes an important contribution in tourism, in terms of promotion and supporting tourists' decision-making (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). This has particularly been the case of online reviews' studies, like those provided through travel-related websites such as Trip Advisor, Booking.com, Trivago.com (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). The online review service provided through these websites aims to support travellers choosing their destination/hotel/other travel services (Dwivedi, Shibu & Venkatesh, 2007; Hudson & Thal, 2013). According to Bray, Schetzina & Steinbrick (2006), Femback & Thomson (1995), Wang, Yu & Fesenmaier (2002), and Yoo, Lee, Gretzel & Fesenmaier (2009), travel online reviews are perceived as similar to the recommendations provided by friends and relatives, and as a more trusted source of information than the official one. Furthermore, Gretzel et al. (2006), and Wang et al. (2002) suggest that the

reason for this impact is that social media decreases uncertainty, and it provides a sense of belonging into virtual travel communities.

However, as Zhang, Pan, Smith & Li (2009) suggested already a few years ago, findings about the impact of online reviews are not conclusive, and 6 years after their study this is still the case. Additional research has suggested that this influence may be limited. This is the case of the work undertaken by Conrad Advertising in association with YouGov (Conrad Advertising & YoGov, 2011). Their study suggests that most of the time, negative reviews do not stop those reading them from booking a service. Similarly, Ayeh et al. (2013), argue that most Internet users do not access online reviews when planning their trips. So what's the reason behind these different results?

The reality is that most research suggesting the impact of online reviews has focused mainly on consumer decision-making and has been quantitative (i.e. Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Fotis et al., 2012; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009 and Dickinger, 2011). Quantitative research is strong in terms of reliability and validity. Nevertheless, it holds the danger of decontextualizing the phenomenon under study by removing the event from its real world setting, and ignoring the effects of variables that may have not been included in the model (Webb & Auriacombe, 2006). De Ascaniis & Greco Morasso (2011) and De Ascaniis & Gretzel (2013) examined the potential impacts of reviews through qualitative studies, but they do this by analysing online reviews rather than asking readers. Hence, as argued by Ayeh et al. (2013), little is known about what makes online reviews relevant to consumers. And research understanding the emotional and behavioural responses at a deep level, helping marketers to understand exactly how, when and where social media influences consumers, is lacking (Hudson & Thal, 2013). One exception is the work by Zhang et al. (2009), which related to an experiment to see how people use online reviews to make decisions about restaurants and activities to do while they are on holidays. The study does not cover online reviews of accommodation, which is the focus of this study. Consequently, this study seeks to address that gap, and to gain an understanding of the real value of online reviews to those reading them.

Hence, the aim of this study is that one of obtaining an understanding of the value of reading accommodation online reviews. However, it should not be confused with those studies focusing on the impact of reviews. As opposed to those studies mainly focused on functional aspects of the reviews (e.g. their impact on decision-making), this one adopts a comprehensive, multidimensional approach to assess consumer value. The literature review will develop a conceptual framework for this concept of consumer value, and examine those studies focused on the impact and use of online reviews. Although these adopt a different approach, they will also enrich the discussion.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Impact and Use of Online Reviews**

There are different views on the level and type of impact of online reviews on traveller's decision making. An extensive number of studies have identified benefits of travel online reviews to potential travellers looking for information. Online reviews have been reported to decrease uncertainty (Gretzel, Fesenmaier & O'Leary 2006; Wang et al., 2002); to act as a source of inspiration (Fotis et al., 2012); to provide information about destinations and products that helps travellers evaluating alternatives; to increase travellers' confidence during decision making, to reduce risk and to assist them in selecting accommodation (Gretzel, Yoo & Purifoy, 2007), and to help avoiding places/services that would not be enjoyed (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008).

Zhang et al. (2009) undertook a qualitative study based on an experiment (run on 34 students) to see how people use online reviews to make decisions about restaurants and the activities they do while on holidays. Participants were given the task to simulate a search for hypothetical trip to China. Their findings show the high reliance on reviews and spot out three heuristics adopted to make decisions based on the information found through online reviews, which are: i) single criterion stopping rule, by which participants pay attention to numerical ratings and not to the total number of reviews or the narrative of the reviews; ii) credibility, by

which instead of judging the message, consumers relied on the credibility of the websites where the information was found; and iii) consensus, by which if others approve the message, the persuasiveness of the message will be enhanced. However, this study does not examine the case of accommodation search, which the authors themselves suggest is one of the two key elements (together with flights) that trigger online information search. Furthermore, little attention is paid to the differences among reviews. Gretzel et al. (2007) and Gretzel & Yoo (2008) look at the influence of meta-communication (e.g. cosmetic factors that make reviews more trustworthy, such as the tone of the review, a balance of pros/cons, the characteristics of the reviewers etc.); the types of travel services which seem to be influenced (i.e. activities, restaurants and accommodation) and those that don't (i.e. choices about the destination, the timing of the trip, and en-route travel planning); and the influence of age and gender on the use of reviews. Related to this is the work by Rodrigues (2009) who argues that age also influences on the credibility attributed to online reviews, with younger generations trusting reviews more than older generations. Additionally, Court et al. (2009) identify different stages in travel decision-making process (i.e. consider; evaluate; buy; enjoy; advocate; and bond) and they suggest that social media especially influences on the evaluate and advocate stages.

Another factor that has been considered relate to the type of trip, and whether it is a repeat destination. For example, Verma, Stock & McCarthy (2012) suggested differences in online behaviour between those travelling for business and leisure. According to their study those travelling for business tend to follow the recommendations given by their company when choosing a hotel. However, when it comes to leisure trips, consumers tend to rely more on personal recommendations, which are then also followed by search engines and online travel agencies. And Simms (2012) suggests that those visiting a destination for the first time will look at online reviews, but not those visiting for a repeat. Also the place where it is written seems to have an important influence. The work by Burgess et al. (2011) suggests that the place where the reviews are located will determine how much they are trusted. Reviews are trusted more when they are placed in travel specific websites more than when they are located in generic social networks websites. Additionally, the information provided by travel agents, commercial operators and comments by travellers on third party websites were trusted. But the highest level of trust was placed on that information provided through State government tourism websites. However, consumers were not sure about trusting comments placed on their own blogs, as well as on generic social networking sites. Related to this is the work by Mack et al. (2008) in Fotis et al. (2012), who suggests that traditional WOM is more trustworthy than blog posts. This may be because in WOM travellers have strong social ties.

However, some of the aspects that have been studied show no conclusive results. For example, Cox et al. (2009) in Fotis et al. (2012) identify the stage of the trip in which online reviews are mainly used. According to their work, their use prior to the trip is very common, and they are hardly used during and after the trip. Contrary, Fotis et al. (2012) undertook an online survey across holiday's makers from the Former Soviet Union Republics, including Russia and suggested that after the trip is the most common time when social media is used, and the reason for this is because it is used to share experiences and photos.

Contradicting results are also those related to trust. A number of authors have suggested that that online reviews provide information valued to a similar degree of that one provided by friends and relatives and more trusted source of information than the official ones (Bray et al. 2006; Femback & Thomson, 1995; Wang et al. 2002; Yoo et al., 2009). However, Cox et al. (2009) in Fotis et al. 2012 suggest that social media were perceived as less trustworthy than traditional sources of information (e.g. official tourism websites and travel agents). The sample relates to the mailing list of an official tourism website which may have skewed the results. However, these are similar results to those presented by Dickinger (2011), who suggested that the type of source influences of the level of trustworthiness of the information provided (User-generated content is considered very informative, but the quality of the information is questioned, and information provided through official authorities websites are considered more trustworthy than those by individual providers).

And there are also conflicting results between the work by Vermeulen & Seegers (2009) and by Gretzel et al. (2007). The former suggests that the reviewers' expertise does not influence on the impact of reviews. However, the work by Gretzel et al. (2007) suggests that the characteristics of the reviewer (such as the tone of the review, a balance of pros/cons, the characteristics of the reviewers, such as whether they have experience travelling or not, etc.) do have an impact on the extent to which their comments are considered.

Furthermore, there are other factors to which no attention has been paid. This is the case of the elements about the hotel/destination or other service that users actively look for; the criteria that they apply when selecting reviews; the impact of the different patterns of information search; and the influence of other

elements such as for example the type of accommodation. Another neglected aspect is that one related to the customer experience Gretzel & Yoo (2008) suggest that online reviews are perceived as enjoyable but no explanation of the reasons behind this enjoyment, and the aspects that make it enjoyable has been provided. And one of the few studies that suggests this issue of a sense of belonging is Gretzel et al. (2006), arguing that social media provides a sense of belonging into virtual travel communities. However, to the knowledge of the researchers, no empirical result has confirmed these suggestions.

In addition, there are also some studies which actually challenge the overall argument that online reviews have such an influence on the decision making of potential travellers. Ayeh et al. (2013) suggest that most Internet users do not access online reviews when planning their trips and that little is known about what makes online reviews relevant to consumers. The work by Conrad Advertising (2011) in association with YouGov, suggests that the influence of online media on travellers' decision may just be limited. Thus, this section of the literature review has supported the identification of a number of gaps in the literature with regards to providing an understanding of what is the real value of accommodation online reviews to potential travellers. These gaps relate to the limited number of studies exploring factors influencing this value, their frequently inconsistent results and the overall lack of a comprehensive and consistent approach for its study. Therefore, the following section will be directed to the identification of a conceptual framework supporting the comprehensive study of the consumer value of accommodation online reviews.

### **3. The theoretical background**

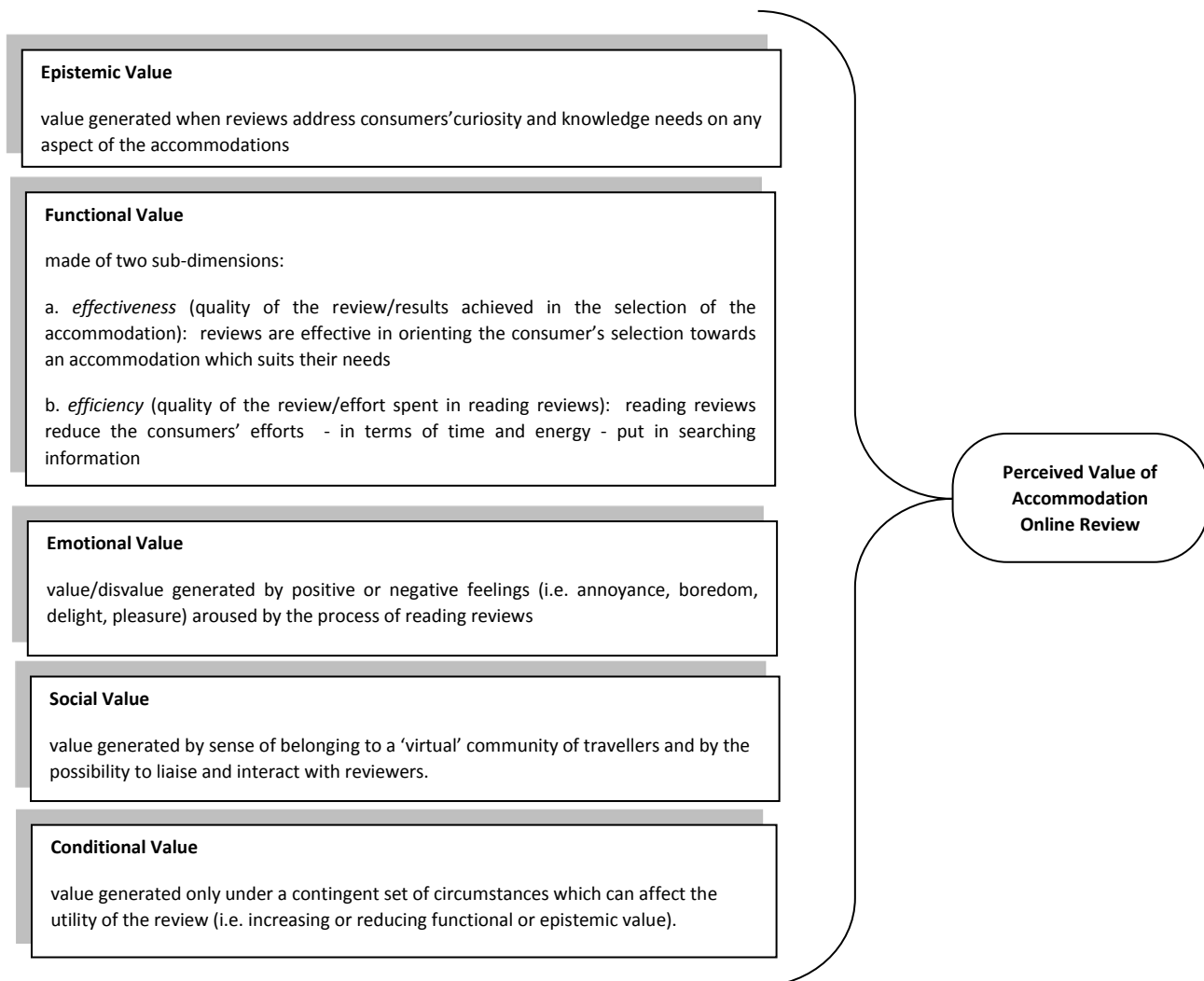
#### **3.1 The Consumer Perceived Value**

Traditionally, the concept of 'value' has been intended as equivalent of price; however from a marketing perspective, 'value' is a trade-off between price and quality - which relies more on the customers' perceptions of the product than on its objective characteristics. Researchers agree that when this definition is applied to intangible products and services, socio-psychological and contextual factors should be taken into consideration (Williams & Soutar, 2000). Accommodation online reviews are essentially contents, written from previous travellers and organized by a website provider. The majority of the value associated with the online reviews is in the cognitive, mental process of the final reader and might be affected by the internal value system that individuals use (Holbrook, 1999), their personal expectations and desires (Spreng, Dixon & Olshavsky, 1993), the shopping experience (Kerin, Jain & Howard, 1992), the context (Bolton & Drue, 1991) or the consumer's personal benefits (Zeithmal, 1998). Thus, beside the objective product related components - such as price and product attributes (Tellis & Gaeth, 1990) – when evaluating accommodation online reviews also more subjective consumers' dimensions should be taken into account; this is why the construct of 'perceived value' seems here to be particularly suitable in exploring the components of the 'value' of the online reviews for consumers.

#### **3.2 The Consumption Theory**

According to the consumption theory (Sheth et al., 1991) the value for the consumers stems from five different aspects of the consumption: epistemic value, functional value, emotional value, social value and conditional value. Fig 1 reports this framework applied to the study of the perceived value of the accommodation online reviews.

**Figure 1.** The framework of the study



The epistemic value originates from the satisfaction of the consumer's desire of knowledge and curiosity. This dimension is a relevant source of value for online reviews due to their informative nature; the epistemic value was considered as the main source of consumer perceived value and a key dimension to explore.

The functional value of the product or service is generated from the accomplishment of its function, the fulfilment of its purpose. In measuring this value, Sweeney and Soutar (2001) split it in two parts: a. the 'value-for-price' that is a comparison between perceived quality and price; b. the 'performance/quality' that is the utility derived from the perceived quality and the performance of the product. Since the online reviews are provided free of monetary disbursement, the price of the accommodation online reviews is here intended as 'effort' in terms of energies and time that the travellers spend in searching information through online reviews. Thus, the performance of online reviews was operationalized as its effectiveness in providing crucial, truthful and reliable information which turned the experience of accommodation into apposite overnight to the travellers.

The emotional value is related to the feeling that the consumption generates; it represents the hedonistic part of the purchase (Sheth et al., 1991) and includes the play or fun gained from it (Holbrook, 1994) or their lack. The social value represents the perceived utility stemming from an alternative's association with one or more specific social groups (Sheth et al., 1991). Its definition has successively been broadened to include the

symbolic social meaning of the consumption (Sweeney, Soutar, Whiteley & Johnson, 1996). It has been suggested that the social media, and thus the online reviews, provides a sense of belonging into virtual travel community (Gretzel et al. 2006), hence the social value for online reviews is operationalized as the creation of linkages with other members of the community and, with its ability to facilitate the identification with specific groups of travellers with common interests.

Finally, Sheth et al. (1991) defined the conditional value like the perceived utility acquired as the result of a specific set of circumstances facing the choice maker (Sheth et al. 1991). The reviews value can change in a different set of circumstances; researchers suggested that travellers, according to their trip purpose (Verma et al., (2012) in Fotis (2012) or its repeated/new nature (Simms, 2012) trust different sources of recommendations. For our research, the conditional value of the accommodation online reviews was taken into consideration by asking interviewees to describe the characteristics of trip (i.e. purpose, length, travelling alone/in company, etc.) for which they have been looking through the online reviews.

#### **4. Methodology**

The aim of the study is to assess the value of accommodation online reviews to consumers. In order to achieve it, the following objectives have been set up:

1. To identify the type of value that reading accommodation online reviews may bring to consumers.
2. To identify common and individual patterns of using accommodation online reviews.

In order to address these objectives, semi structured in-depth interviews were carried out. Consistently with the explorative nature of this work, the interviews were semi-structured in five sections reflecting the framework presented above. Each section covered a specific value dimension (epistemic, functional, emotional, social, and conditional) and included a set of open ended questions for stimulating the interviewees in talking freely about the topic and, for obtaining information on the interviewee's cognitive and decisional process (Fig. 2). Twenty five semi-structured in-deep interviews were undertaken in between August 2014 and March 2015. Each interview lasted around an hour, and they took place in various locations of the UK and Italy. Convenience sampling was adopted to recruit participants, based on their availability and their reported experience with the use of accommodation online reviews. The sample achieved representation of seven nationalities, including Italian, Spanish, Irish, Indian, Czech Republic, Bulgarian and British, to avoid potential cross-national differences. A higher percentage of participants were female, though there was also male representation (18 females and 7 male) and ages varied between 22 and 56 years old only.

**Figure 2.** The perceived value of the accommodation online reviews: interview guide

Value Dimension	Guide Questions
<b>Epistemic Value</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What characteristics of the accommodation do you look for when reading through online reviews?</li> <li>- Have the reviews always satisfied your curiosity/need of knowledge?</li> <li>- If not, which type of information would you like to find out in them?</li> </ul>
<b>Functional Value</b>	<p><i>Effectiveness: Quality of the review/Result</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are the consumers' comments credible and worthy to be read? Or biased and useless?</li> <li>- Do the reviews provide appropriate 'hints' in the accommodation searching?</li> <li>- Have the reviews ever been effective in guiding the selection of a convenient accommodation? Why?</li> </ul> <p><i>Efficiency: Quality of the review/Effort</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How much time do you spend in reading reviews?</li> <li>- Do you consider the customers' reviews a waste of time?</li> <li>- Is reading reviews an easy and fast activity or difficult and time-consuming?</li> <li>- Would you like the information/reviews being displayed and organized in a more effective way?</li> <li>- Were the reviews easy to be read?</li> </ul>
<b>Emotional Value</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do you enjoy reading reviews? Do you like it?</li> <li>- Any specific aspect do you enjoy in reading reviews?</li> <li>- What do you dislike in going through reviews?</li> </ul>
<b>Social Value</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do the reviews make you feel part of a community/group of interests (i.e. traveler, consumers)?</li> <li>- Have you ever interacted with some of the reviewer, I mean exchanging email, comments, replying to their comments? Could you tell me about it?</li> </ul>
<b>Conditional Value</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Type of accommodation</li> <li>- Type of website used for search</li> <li>- Motivation of the trip/stay</li> <li>- Overnight length</li> <li>- Frequency of overnight</li> </ul>

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Epistemic Value

Participants reported on the epistemic value of the reviews, by suggesting on different types of knowledge that they acquired through online reviews. Some of these aligned and extend on those suggestions made by extant studies. Similarly to the suggestions by Gretzel et al., (2006) and Wang et al., (2002), participants said that this information decreases uncertainty (Gretzel et al., 2006); acts as a source of inspiration (Fotis et al., 2012); provides information about destinations and products that helps travellers evaluating alternatives; increases travellers' confidence during decision making, reduces risk and assists them in selecting accommodation (Gretzel et al., 2007), and helps them avoiding places/services that would not be enjoyed (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). However, they also provide details about additional types of knowledge. The first one relates to the information which allows them to corroborate the data given by providers (especially with regards to aspects of quality); that one helping to adjust their expectations about establishments in that area and for that price (building them up or bringing them down); and that one to complement their knowledge with information that does not normally appear on the accommodation's websites (e.g. the safety of the area where the establishment is located or noise).

In terms of the type of information that participants look for when reading reviews these varied extensively. They related to cleanliness, smell, the general state of the room, hot water, good shower pressure, service quality, noise, any refurbishment going on in the accommodation or around, WIFI's quality (especially when abroad), location, facilities in the area (i.e. restaurants, walking distance to attractions, taxis, etc.), whether it is fairly modern, staff friendliness, food quality, aesthetics, views, quality of breakfast or food, information for pet owners, convenience, level of comfort, close-by transport facilities, security and safety.

Variations related to the type of accommodation, travel budget, type of destination and travel party/type of trip were reported by the participants. Furthermore participant 2 suggested that when going on packaged holidays she does not read them. This would only be relevant to her when booking individual holidays. In terms of the influence of type of accommodation, participant 4 suggested that when renting privately owned apartments, a crucial element is to find out how easy it is to deal with the owner. However, this is not that important when looking for hotels. With regards to the impact of the destination, participant 3 suggested that when looking for a hotel in London, views are not that important. This is because London is lively destination where the key element is sightseeing and limited time is spent at the hotel. Furthermore, it is a very expensive city. Therefore, location and price become more important. In terms of the influence of the travel party, participant 4 suggested that noise may be a big issue for families, but it may be a positive aspect for those looking for a lively location, such as groups of young friends. An example of how the type of trip influences is that one provided by participant 5. This participant suggested that location is essential for her when travelling for business. However, when travelling for leisure, the aesthetics of the place become highly relevant. Furthermore, participants reported on the different weight of elements. For example participant 7 suggested that tidiness, cleanliness and safety are the most important elements for her. But elements like kindness of staff are not the first priority. And even within cleanliness certain aspects acquire more importance than others. For example, participant 7 also suggested that she would not mind too much if there is some dust on the carpet, but "if someone says something about stains on bed sheets, towels or the bathroom I immediately remove the hotel from the shortlist".

## **5.2 Functional Value**

Evidence of the functional value of the reviews was also identified, both in terms of quality and time. With regards to quality, there is an indication that participants only see their needs met to a certain extent. Only four participants reported that their information needs were met. Quotes regarding this question were of the type such as "it is the only information that I can get other than that one provided by the hotel". Therefore, it seems that it is the best possible solution, although not ideal. With regards to trust, participants also showed mixed views (only four out of ten trust them). Bray et al. 2006; Femback & Thomson, 1995; Wang et al. 2002; and Yoo et al. (2009) argued that UGC is perceived as similar to recommendations provided by friends and relatives, and it is a more trusted source of information than the official one. However according to this study, reviews are read because there is no other type of information available other than the official. Furthermore, there are big differences across websites, not only between the website of the provider and commercial online review sites - as suggested by Burgess, et al. (2011) and between WOM websites and individual blogs, as Mack et al. (2008) in Fotis et al. (2012) argues - but also between commercial sites themselves. For example, participant 3 suggested that she does not trust Tripadvisor because she knows someone who writes fake reviews in Tripadvisor for a living. However, she does trust booking.com.

The data provides an interesting insight into the elements that influence the perception on the review quality. Some of these align with those suggested by Gretzel et al. (2007) and Gretzel & Yoo (2008), which looked at the influence of meta-communication. As suggested by these authors, and contrary to what Vermeulen & Seegers (2009) suggest, one of these elements is the availability of information about the reviewer. Both participants 5 and 6 made emphasis on the importance of this element. Issues related to age and gender suggested by Gretzel et al. (2007), Gretzel & Yoo (2008) and Rodrigues (2009) could not be identified during the interviews due to the nature of the study (qualitative). But an additional element which had not been suggested by the literature relates to the nationality of the reviewer. Participant 7 suggested that they only trust reviews from reviewers of the same nationality on certain aspects. In the case of



participant 7 (Italian) she suggested, with regards to comments about cleanliness, that "it is important that comments come from Italians, as I do not consider English criteria and judgements reliable on that". And with regards to the functional value-time element, overall, reviews are not perceived as a waste of time. This is because people spend the time that they choose to spend. However, it should be noted that the time spent widely varies, going from only spend 5 minutes (participant 7) up to 6 hours (participant 2).

With regards to the decision-making process, as suggested by studies like Gretzel & Yoo (2008), Fotis et al. (2012), and Vermeulen & Seegers (2009), reviews seem to make an influence. Also as suggested by Court et al. (2009), the influence of online reviews differs at each individual stage. However, while Court et al. (2009) suggested that social media specially influences on the evaluate and advocate stages, the participants in this study reported on the influence of online reviews at the consideration (in terms of inspiration), evaluation and purchase stages only. Interestingly, the strategies for the selection of reviews varies depending on the stage of decision-making supported. Thus, participants reading reviews to inform the consideration and evaluation stages select the reviews based on ratings (looking at the positive, at the negatives or a mix), and/or meta-communication aspects (i.e. tone, the formality of the message, tidiness, length, etc.). However, those participants reading reviews to support the purchase stage only will read all the reviews, the first few ones, the first page, or so on.

### **5.3 Emotional Value**

The views regarding the emotional value of reviews are also quite mixed. According to Gretzel and Yoo (2008) reading reviews has been reported as enjoyable. However, the results suggest that only six out of ten participants suggested that they did enjoy the reviews. The other four did not, but that they read them for practical reasons. Of those who did enjoy them they reported that they felt like gossiping (participant 1) and it helped them daydreaming about their trip (participant 9).

### **5.4 Social Value**

No evidence of sociable value of reviews was found. When asked, participants suggested that they did not feel part of a virtual community, which would differ from the suggestions made by Gretzel et al. (2006). These differences could be determined by the type of sample, which in Gretzel et al. (2006) related to a Tripadvisor consumer panel. Due to the nature of Tripadvisor, which provides space for reviews not only of accommodation but also of destinations and all other aspects of the trip, it is likely that the people belonging to a consumer panel of these characteristics have the feeling of being part of a community.

Finally, the results seem to indicate that consumers have developed skills to make reviews useful despite of their limitations. Reviews are examined with a critical eye, and customers are making their own judgements about giving them consideration. Ratings are not directly influencing on their decisions, however, they do influence at the "Information Search" stage.

## **6. Conclusion**

A significant number of studies have been directed to identify the impact that travel online reviews have on consumers. However, these mainly focus only on the activity of decision-making and they tend to be quantitative. One of the consequences of this is that they tend to adopt a one-dimensional approach, focused on the purchase decision-making process. Furthermore, they tend to ignore additional benefits/cost-effects that online reviews may have on consumers (e.g. fun, time, etc.), and to consider all reviews equally important; only a few studies have been directed to understand the differences influencing on their impact and these have been identified in the literature review section (i.e. Gretzel et al, 2007; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Rodrigues, 2009; Court et al., 2009; Verma et al., 2012; Simms, 2012; Burgess et al., 2011; Mack et al. (2008) in Fotis et al (2012); Cox et al. (2009) in Fotis et al. (2012); and Fotis (2012). However, some of these studies present contradictory results and/or neglect certain aspects, such as the influence of the content of reviews, or differences related to the information search patterns of consumers. While the authors

acknowledge the importance of also other areas of travel, this study has only focused on accommodation online reviews. Hence, the aim of this study has been that one of obtaining an understanding of the value of accommodation online reviews, by undertaking a qualitative study and avoiding the limitations of quantitative research.

In addition to identifying the gap in the literature, the literature reviews section developed a conceptual framework of perceived consumer value. This is to ensure a consistent and comprehensive research approach for the study. The framework suggests that the consumer value of online reviews is made of four different components: epistemic, functional (both in terms of quality and time), emotional and social value. Ten one hour face-to-face interviews with users of online reviews were undertaken, and questions were directed to identify the elements that the generated epistemic, functional, emotional and social value of accommodation online reviews.

The results suggested that the value of reviews is primary epistemic and partially functional, but limited emotional value has been reported and the social value seemed inexistent. Travellers read reviews when booking accommodation, but they do it just because this is the only way to access certain type of information other than the one given by the accommodation provider, and those interviewed suggested that they do not feel part of an online community. Furthermore, the study also helped identifying the elements that elicit the different value dimensions.

Limitations related to the nature of the qualitative nature of the study (small sample, lacking representation of all demographic groups) should be taken into consideration. Further research, this time quantitative should continue this line of study. Despite these limitations, the implications of this study are important to the industry, because they help managers understanding the scope of influence of online reviews. Furthermore, it contributes to the advancement of knowledge in the topic of information search for travelling. This will support the customisation of information provided to customers, which given the constantly increasing array of travel-related information produced every day, is emerging as an essential area for development. Therefore, they are of important value to accommodation establishments' managers, but also to commercial websites with online reviewing functionalities, and to Reputation Management System providers.

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