

# **The London School of Economics and Political Science**

## **The becoming of social media: The role of rating, ranking and performativity in organizational reputation-making**

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## **Declaration**

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the concept of reputation-making with the aim of explaining how the rise of user-generated content websites has influenced organizational reputation-making practices 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 operator, TripAdvisor and an adaptation of virtual ethnography called “netnography”. Rating and ranking of hotels on social media websites has not only disturbed the established reputation-making practices of professionals in the travel sector and contributed to a significant redirection of reservation revenue but has performative consequences for tourist encounters. In other words, it is argued that if key assumptions underpinning the rating and ranking of travel change, the enactment of travel itself is reconfiguring and this has important implications for how reputation-making occurs. The reconfigurations documented in the study are theorized using the lens of Process Theory. Originally inspired by philosophers such as Bergson and Whitehead and adopted in the work of organizational theorists such as Tsoukas, Chia, Langley, and Nayak, the choice of Process Theory to inform the conduct of this study resonates with key streams of existing reputation research that view it as a dynamic phenomenon. Core concepts within Process Theory, such as “becoming” enable further investigation into the precise nature of this dynamism by focusing on relations as always fluid and on the move. The challenge, even for literature that acknowledges phenomena as dynamic, is how to temporarily pause the flow for the purpose of analysis and thereby approach becoming without disturbing its inherent nature. This is taken up in the first analysis chapter which uses the notion of place to illustrate and analyze reputation-making using the process of becoming. The chapter argues the importance of recognizing the temporary pauses produced by rating and ranking mechanisms as generative rather than merely reductive algorithmically produced representations. In this way, we get closer to understanding the performativity of phenomena such as TripAdvisor and produce fundamental insights informing organizational reputation-making. It is argued that the organizational devices through which travellers’ engage with the places they visit are not only “making” reputations but are also making formative differences to the practice of travelling. In the second analysis chapter, a key issue associated with these changes - the intensification in focus on service – is explored further and in-depth examination of the field data is used to highlight ways in which TripAdvisor amplifies attention given to the specific characteristics of practices when they are performed. This provides evidence to ground Tsoukas and Chia’s (2002) proposal that organizational change is achieved through ‘microscopic changes’ thus reinforcing the processual nature of change. In so doing, key insights are generated to inform organizational reputation-making. Returning to the tenet of becoming in the third analysis chapter, the “circle of (il)legitimacy” embraces processual principles - for the nature of the circle is to have no beginning or end – but acknowledges the cumulative outcome of configuring practices for hoteliers through a discussion of key issues emerging in the travel sector. The relationship between reputation-making and legitimization is highlighted with examples of the additional processes through which reputation can now be made vulnerable within multiple jurisdictional contexts. The thesis concludes with the assertion that if we aim to understand the phenomenon of reputation-making, we have to develop a more nuanced and sophisticated way to conceptualize its formative nature. It is suggested that this extends beyond snap shot assessments or post-hoc crisis management to on-going maintenance of its emergence and development as well as processual changes across time and space.

*To my wonderful parents Effie and Nikos,*

## Acknowledgements

Γένεση

*Aύτὸ τὸ γαρύφαλλο, ποὺ κρατώντας τὸ  
ἀνάμεσα στὰ τρία μου δάχτυλα  
τὸ σηκώνω στὸ φῶς, μοῦ μίλησε καὶ  
παρὰ τὸν κοινὸ νοῦ μου τὸ κατανόησα.  
Μι' ἀλυσίδα ἀπὸ ἀτέλειωτον γαλαξίες  
συνεργάστηκαν,  
διασταύρωσαν κάτω στὴ γῆ φωταγίες  
- τὸ σύμπαν ὅλοκληρο πῆρε μέρος στὴ  
γέννηση  
αὐτοῦ τοῦ γαρύφαλλον.  
Κι' αὐτὸ ποὺ ἀκούω εἶναι οἱ φωνὲς  
τῶν μαστόρων τοῦ μέσα του.*

Νικηφόρος Βρεττάκος

Η φιλοσοφία των λουλουδιών, 1988

Genesis

*This carnation while keeping it  
among my three fingers  
I raise it towards the light, it spoke to me  
despite my common sense I understand it.  
An endless chain of galaxies  
collaborated,  
crossed down to earth lights on  
- The entire universe took part in the  
genesis  
of this carnation.  
And what I can hear are the voices  
of the craftsmen from within it.*

Nikiforos Vrettakos

The philosophy of flowers, 1988

I certainly cannot put into words the love and warmth, or the intensity with which I want to thank my beloved ones. However, I will make an effort...

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## **List of Acronyms**

(A)AA	(American) Automobile Association
B&B	Bed and Breakfast
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CMC	Computer-Mediated- Communication
DE	Destination Experts
eWOM	Electronic Word Of Mouth
FAQs	Frequently Asked Questions
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
IS	Information Systems
IT	Information Technology
PMs	Personal Messages
RBV	Resource-based-view
RSS	Really Simple Syndication
TA	TripAdvisor
UGC	User Generated Content
WOM	Word Of Mouth

## Chapter 1 Introduction

This dissertation presents an analysis of an in-depth field study focusing on the process of reputation-making in the travel sector. In the last decade, we have witnessed an explosion of emergent web technologies and platforms that have drawn the attention of the academic community, as well as of professionals in many sectors. More specifically social web (or web 2.0<sup>1</sup>) and user-generated content (UGC) websites, such as Facebook, YouTube and TripAdvisor have enabled interactions at a scale and scope that were not achievable in the past. This kind of exposure and communication where users collectively construct large amounts of informal knowledge, has given organizations the opportunity to develop new online marketing strategies. The motivation for this research has been to understand the extent to which the process of reconfiguring customers as online collectives or ‘followers’ - and their emergence as publishers and content creators - is transforming organizational practices. Key to this process are the ways in which user-generated content is organized into forms of ranking and rating that disturb established reputation management practices and contribute to a significant redirection of revenue. The question that arises from the convergence of these research interests is formulated as follows: how have UGC websites transformed organizational reputation-making in the travel sector?

The first section of this introductory chapter frames reputation in the context of travel user-generated content and highlights the distinguishing characteristics of this sector. The notion of reputation is problematized and the tradition of managing reputation in the travel sector is outlined before revealing how the largest travel user-generated content website, TripAdvisor, has developed from a novel interloper to a routine and habitualized practice. The second section introduces the main themes in the dissertation and describes its key goal: the development of a more nuanced way to conceptualize reputation through its *formativeness*, without distinguishing between the online and the offline. This is achieved by adopting a theoretical lens that prioritizes the constitutive nature of organizational practices such as reputation-*making*. In light of this goal, we introduce key principles of the process perspective and in particular the notion of *becoming*, which are used in the thesis to theorize the

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis we have not distinguished UGC from Web 2.0 and Social Media. For an analysis, the reader can see Baka and Scott 2009.

reconfigurations of reputation-making. The chapter concludes by briefly outlining the organization and structure of the dissertation.

## 1.1 Framing the thesis

Most studies interested in reputation primarily focus either on individual behaviour or corporate reactions, defining reputation 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). Within this tradition, reputation *management* is based upon periodic ‘snap shot’ analyses which produce relatively static representations. While the notion that performances are important to reputation is generally recognized, there are few attempts to develop a framework for identifying the processual dynamics at work or understanding the *making* of reputation from an ongoing constitutive perspective. In taking up this challenge, this study focuses on how, where and when temporary reputations of hotels emerge and in what sense their enactment reconfigures the practice of managing them in the context of travel.

Although there is a strong emphasis on individual behaviour in existing reputation literature, the rise of user-generated content necessitates a revision to its conceptualization and management. As O’ Connor (2010) notes: “the Internet has amplified and turbo-charged Word Of Mouth into a mass communications medium”. The importance of everyday opinions as opposed to the official marketing material is evident in the number of websites that host this content, such as products (Epinions, Viewpoints), restaurants (Yelp), movies (Rottentomatoes, Netflix), travel (TripAdvisor, Flyertalk) etc. According to a recent survey conducted by The Pew Internet & American Life Project “among internet users, 78% say that they at least occasionally conduct product research and 32% report that they have posted online product comments<sup>2</sup>”, which is indicative of the influence reviews have on buying decisions and reputations. Within the travel sector, websites organized around the ranking and ratings of user-generated content have become particularly influential.

Indeed, it could be argued that the travel sector is one of the sectors in which this form of technological innovation has had greatest impact. In many ways, perhaps this

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<sup>2</sup> <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Online-Product-Research/Findings.aspx?view=all>

should not come as such a surprise since, as Hallin and Marnburg (2008) note, the tourism and hospitality sector has been one of the largest adopters of information technology. The history of technology in the travel sector reveals many pioneering initiatives to establish global infrastructure, for example the combination of electronic transactions with the use of reservation systems (Copeland and McKenny 1988). Therefore, our study of the dynamics involved in reputation making takes place in a context in which travel and technology are already entangled. As contemporary travellers, most of us have direct personal experience of – and now assume – a relatively sophisticated degree of interconnectivity in the information systems through which this sector is made to work. Since travel forms a regular routine for academics, many of us have even engaged with travel websites and experienced user-generated content. It follows that much of the attention that has been given to travel websites, which are after all designed to support trip planning, has understandably fallen upon the traveller.

However, it is important to recognize that, especially in the travel sector, the emergence of web 2.0 and UGC has stimulated the development of new forms of interactive marketing and has considerable implications for management practices across the spectrum of hospitality and service-based business. It is widely acknowledged that the dynamism of UGC has shaken the well-established principles of reputation management as it was known (word of mouth, complaints and crises management, general advertisement strategies and everyday practices). While reputation has always been regarded as a potential organizational asset, the rise of UGC has not only forced reputation management onto the agenda but also into the law courts (see Kwikchex case in chapter 7). For these reasons, it is argued that user-generated content has intensified the need for academic research to study the challenges and consequences that are unfolding. Since TripAdvisor's website is the largest and most significant example of travel user-generated content currently online, the travel sector affords an important opportunity for such a project.

Information Systems and travel and hospitality scholars have notably pointed out that UGC has gradually been incorporated into the decision making process (O'Connor 2010; Erdem and Cobanoglou 2010), has influenced travel planning behaviour (Cox et al. 2009; Parra-Lopez et al. 2011; Stringam et al. 2010) and has revised the ways complaints are formulated by customers and managed by organizations (Zheng et al.

2009). However, rather than treating new media and UGC as an exogenous shock, we propose a study of reputation that is deeply bound up with its constitutive character through practices and their multiple manifestations; as we will explain we will look at reputation *making* rather than *management*. This disparity between reputation management and reputation-making roots in the fundamental difference between re-presentation and re-creation and constitutes the backbone to understand the central theme of formative reputation and its becoming.

This research journey takes us through particular theoretical terrains including process theory and the notion of becoming, as well as organizational process studies. In the following section, we will illustrate how the above framing provides a foundation for the research undertaken by inspiring a methodological approach, focusing on particular themes in the literature and establishing priorities for the analysis.

## 1.2 Main themes and key principles

If we aim to understand the phenomenon of reputation-making, we have to grapple with the constitutive nature of reputation. In other words, how reputation emerges develops and transforms as a process in time and space. In the next sub-section we briefly present key assumptions from Process Theory, explain how they characterize organizational process studies, and in so doing prepare the reader for their role in crafting the thesis.

### 1.2.1 Place-making and the generative mechanism of reputational process

At the core of process as a ‘style of thinking’ (Chia 1995) lies the acknowledgement that phenomena continually unfold and therefore are always in movement and flux. This starting point is central to the approach of *becoming* adopted in this study. Thinking in terms of becoming starts in the first analysis chapter in which we attempt to establish the grounds for understanding how a unified perception of placeness influences our assumptions about the practices of reputation-making. It is this first chapter that prepares the reader to move beyond reputation management and appreciate the formative nature of reputation through what we might term the spatial becoming of reputation. It is argued that from a process perspective, reputation-making for hotels is intimately interwoven with places. As the brand strategist Peter

Economides noted in his presentation in the first Google Travel Forum, “We do not use the web, we inhabit the web”.

If we extend our process thinking to the practice of travelling, we see that UGC is not atomistic input for an algorithm that forms part of a distant website but is inseparable from the hotel that the traveller experiences. In effect, as the geographer Doreen Massey (2005: pp.140-141) argues we are witnessing: “...the way that very diverse elements that cross categories such as the natural or social come together to foster a particular ‘here and now. This is what makes places specific – this gathering of diverse entities into relation”. Using examples from our field study of UGC in the travel sector, we illustrate Massey’s notion of “thowntogetherness” and propose it as a further important dimension of reputational (per)formativeness.

We thus allude to how travellers engage with the places they visit or they read about and in so doing how they shape temporary reputations in a process of reputation-making. This first chapter introduces formative reputation by exploring the ways in which physical and imaginary travels are entangled with hotel practices. With the use of Process Theory, Practice Theory and the notion of performativity we examine the generative mechanism of Process and turn our analytical gaze to how UGC reconstitutes reputation-making along with the on-going becoming of the places that travellers and users pass through.

### **1.2.2 The becoming of reputation-making and the nature of change in process studies**

The following chapters in the dissertation focus extensively on how the power relationships and practices in the travel sector transform due to the emergence of UGC. As Langley (1999) notes, “process research is concerned with understanding how things evolve over time and why they evolve in this way”. This means that in studying phenomena from a process view, we are very much interested in the nature of change and transformation over time. The nature of change is central to the work of organizational practice theorists like Lucy Suchman, Orlikowski, Feldman, Pettigrew, Gherardi and many more who point out the difference between treating organizational strategies as stable dispositions and viewing them as emergent and situated accomplishments. Inspired by this stream of practice-based studies and following the call by authors such as Chia, Tsoukas, Nayak, Clegg and many other

process theorists to more actively engage with a process approach we adopt the tenet of “the processual nature of transformation” as a core theoretical vehicle with which we support a critical shift in thinking about reputation as “formative”.

However, assuming that the world is always in process presents us with both a methodological and practical challenge: if life never pauses, how can we justify analytical interventions that necessarily impose a relationship to time and space? How can we claim to contribute to reputation-making practice, if it is always on the move? This is achieved when we genuinely think through Process and becoming. From a Process perspective, we cannot pause the movement, nor can we precisely identify our role in it, but with abstractions we undertake we pretend we could. What we call abstractions serve as the acts through which we temporarily pretend we decontextualize the fuzzy phenomenon. Although it is early in the thesis to explain the importance of the following realization, it suffices to note that abstractions will not help us pause the world in order to describe it because in so doing we inescapably create a different world. Thus we do not re-present but re-create a different world. We will also argue that the constitutive elements of reputation formation do not preexist *a priori*, yet they come into existence as a unity in practice and in this sense they are always recreated anew whenever we decide to turn our attention to the phenomenon.

These ideas are harmonized through the notion of becoming which both helps us to establish the status of analyses produced through abstraction (as a situated generation of ideas) and suggests a particular conceptualization of change that is distinctly characteristic of process thinking. As Tsoukas and Chia (2002) note: “Traditional approaches to organizational change have been dominated by assumptions privileging stability, routine, and order”. From a process studies perspective, “change is the normal condition of organizational life” (*ibid*). Although recurring behaviours happen, they are intrinsically unstable and overflow the categories that they inhabit. Therefore even if organizational patterns, such as everyday practices, persist and give the illusion of stability there are ‘microscopic changes’ in their performance which is sometimes suggested through terms such as “creep”, “slippage”, and “drift”, it is here that we find convergence between the long standing tradition of process theory and the current interest in the “practice lens” (see Feldman and Orlikowski 2011). Moreover, within practice research, the focus on ostensive and performative aspects

of routines (Feldman 2000) helps us to draw attention to ways in which the formativeness of reputation in practice has intensified, yet manages to retain unity as an organizational category.

### **1.2.3 The intensification of the dynamic relationships forming reputation-making: legitimization and reputational ‘becoming’**

Through the tenet of becoming that is the main theme throughout the thesis we embrace the dynamics of formative reputation and in chapter seven consider its relationship to the process of legitimization. Whereas a star-rating from a hotel accreditation remains for 12-18 months (Scott and Orlikowski 2009), the reputational standing of a hotel on TripAdvisor is potentially the focus of on-going contestation. To this end we propose the “circle of (il)legitimacy” to show how algorithmic configurations have thrown hoteliers into a more dynamic process of reputation-building and rebuilding. In other words, how ‘formativeness’ as defined here culminates in cases whereby legitimacy and illegitimacy are constitutive of each other. Hoteliers find themselves having to establish the *i*llegitimacy of online reviews in order to *re*-establish the legitimacy of their professional integrity and the reputational standing of their hotel.

What makes reputations temporarily legitimate and according to whose patterns and codes? Travel UGC provides compelling illustrations of the difficulty and effort involved in drawing the line between official authorities and users’ content. This leaves us exploring the possibilities for managing formative reputation when the configurations of rating and ranking mechanisms are beyond hoteliers’ control. It also inspires a further philosophical turn in which we question *where* reputation manifests?

The following and last section summarizes the structure of the thesis.

## **1.3 Outline and structure**

Following this introductory chapter, the thesis is divided into four sections covering: theoretical framework (Part I); research setting (Part II); analysis (Part III); and conclusion (Part IV). Chapter 2 forms part of the theoretical framework (Part I) providing the reader with the fundamental concepts that underlie the thesis (reputation management and -making) and the approach taken (practice theory,

process studies and performativity). In chapter 3, we cast some light on the methodological choices and the rationale behind them. Both case study research strategy and netnography (as an adaptation of virtual ethnography) are discussed. Personal accounts of how fieldwork has been experienced highlight the trials and tribulations in research practice and add to our understanding of the difficulties involved in conducting online research with principles and ethical frameworks predominantly designed for offline contexts.

Part II introduces the research setting and in particular the findings from the case study and the netnographical study (chapter 4) and Part III discusses those in the three analysis chapters (5, 6, 7). Finally, in the concluding chapter (Part IV), a brief summary of the dissertation is presented and the research question is revisited in order to establish the contributions to literature and implications for management practice. (See figure 1 for the outline described).

## Introduction

- Chapter 1

## Part I- Theoretical Framework

- Chapter 2: Reputation: From being an organizational asset to becoming a process in the making
- Chapter 3: Methodology

## Part II- Empirical Setting

- Chapter 4: Case Study: Exploring TripAdvisor's Dynamics

## Part III- Analysis Section

- Chapter 5: Place-Making and the Performativity of Travel Practices: *Where* is reputation-making enacted?
- Chapter 6: Reputation-making in the *making*
- Chapter 7: The circle of (il)legitimacy and a revised agenda for reputation-making in the era of social media

## Part IV- Conclusions

- Chapter 8: Conclusions

Figure 1 Outline of the thesis

## **Part I**

### **Theoretical Framework**

## **Chapter 2 Reputation: From being an organizational asset to becoming a process in the making**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter forms the foundation for the analysis chapters that follow and is divided into two main parts. The first part reviews the notion of reputation from different streams of literature and in so doing identifies areas where the thesis in this dissertation will contribute. The second part of the chapter transitions the reader into the theoretical concepts the thesis is based upon. In particular the structure of the sections is as follows. First, literature on reputation and reputation management is reviewed beginning with the dominant tradition in which reputation has been treated as an intangible organizational asset that needs to be measured and ranked in a hierarchical list. The review then moves on to focus on other literatures that view reputation as a social construct thus challenging the strict logic of Game Theory and classic economics. Since this study centres on the emergence of online reputation-making, literature from Marketing and Organizational Behaviour exploring the relationship between reputation, Word Of Mouth (WOM) and electronic Word Of Mouth (e-WOM) is considered in detail. What unifies these sections is the interest in uncovering the constitutive nature of reputation-making: the processes through which reputation and online WOM are dynamically constituted. The aim of this doctoral research study is thus to emphasize the formative nature of reputation.

Then the chapter reviews the main theoretical concepts resting in Process Theory. Before locating the study in the genre of Process Studies and introducing key principles of Process Theory, we begin with the literature on practice-based studies that connect to Process and set up the theoretical foundations of the study. In the end of the theoretical section we present the notion of performativity which appears as a particular way of interpreting the process perspective. Before we move on to review the reputation literature, table 1 lays out the key themes from the literature review that are taken forward and are developed in the thesis. The definitions and conceptualizations of reputation (see Table 1) suggest that it can be conceived as a strategic asset, a perceptual representation or a socially constructed phenomenon. However, the main shortcoming of previous empirical studies is that they do not appreciate how reputation is constitutive of interrelated practices that are always on

the move. Therefore, it is reasonable to analyze what we coin formative reputation, a concept that will become clearer once we visit the theoretical backbone of the thesis: Process Theory and the supporting ideas developed from practice-based studies and performativity.

Key concepts in the reputation literature	Main points in the thesis based on the key concepts in the literature
Reputation is the most critical, strategic and enduring, asset that a corporation possesses (Cravens et al. 2003).	It is claimed that we are missing how organizational reputation is constituted (the process of reputation-making), an area we should turn our attention to if we aim to uncover reputation-making.
Reputation is conceived as the perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects, most often related to performance and financial growth (Fombrun 1996; Rindova et al. 2007).	We propose <i>formative</i> reputation to evoke the disparity between representation and re-creation. Appreciating this disparity forms the backbone of the thesis on reputation-making and illuminates why reputation-making is fundamentally different from reputation management.
Reputation is the product of outsiders' assessments about what the organization is, how well it meets its commitments and conforms to stakeholders' expectations (Brown and Logsdon 1999; Hall 1992; Logsdon and Wartick 1995).	We need a fresh view on how plausibility is related to reputation-making in the globalized environment, especially after the emergence of the Internet and UGC websites. Along these lines, we will also revisit Urry's mediated gaze and how it has been transformed from the perspective of a unified definition of place.
Reputation is a socially constructed, distributed knowledge phenomenon that creates powerful incentives for good behavior (Rein 2005).	In the thesis we move beyond perceiving reputation as a construct and we rather focus on how reputation-making is enacted.
Media reputation is part of the overall evaluation of a firm as presented in the media (Deephouse 2000).	The dynamics of media has been transformed with the evolution of technology and the emergence of new media.
Reputational metrics and rankings are 'reactive' by generating self-reinforcing behaviors (Espeland and Sauder 2007). Perceptions around reputation may or may not be true, but they are social facts which generate actions and reactions (Power et al. 2009).	Building on this generativity described in the literature, we connect process, practice and the notion of performativity to study reputation-making and the interrelated practices that have in turn consequences.
eWord Of Mouth (eWOM) appears as a constitutive part of reputation and is defined 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 (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Litvin et al. 2008; Schindler and Bickart 2005).	The literature focuses on what eWOM <i>is</i> rather than how it is constituted or what kind of practices it is constitutive of. We will focus on the practice of reputation-making in the travel sector and its transformations over time.

Table 1. Summary of the key concepts in the literature and why they serve as interesting departure points for further research

## 2.2 A review of Reputation and Reputation Management

Reputation as a concept has been an organizational issue since the emergence of the organization even without naming or realizing it as such. What has changed over the years is the way it is described, perceived and enacted on a daily basis as well as its role in strategic planning. The academic literature has dedicated much ink to keeping the discussion going about reputation's definition, importance and relationship to economic performance on the grounds that "the most critical, strategic and enduring, asset that a corporation possesses is its reputation" (Cravens et al. 2003). Regardless of the theoretical framing of reputation, its importance and implications are generally recognized by organizational stakeholders. 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); a definition which notes the representational character of reputation.

The reputation agenda has been an enduring part of the social sciences milieu. The key ideas range from rationalism and positivism all the way to social constructivism and postmodernism. There are multiple perspectives on reputation ranging from the rationalistic tradition in which reputation is an economic good or an asset (Schelling 1980) that may be bought and sold (Kreps 1990) to a more interpretive approach suggesting that reputation is embodied in the beliefs of others (Axelrod 1984) rather than something you own (in Sharman 2007). In terms of its management in organizations, "...approaches to reputation risks tend to be static, asset-oriented, and reactive" (Scott and Walsham 2005). In the following section, we will attempt to map the main trends characterizing the literature in this area in order to locate and differentiate the position of this thesis.

The most dominant tradition in the literature is the rationalistic, which treats reputation as an intangible asset critical for the future organizational actions and decisions. Taewon and Amine (2007) view it as "an intangible asset which expresses the evaluation of stakeholders as to whether the firm is substantially good or bad and reflects the cumulative knowledge about the company's past and present acts". A similar definition is proposed by Hall (1992, 1993), who emphasizes that reputation is produced by the interactions of the firm with its stakeholders and by the circulation

of information about the firm between them (see also Fombrun 1996; Logsdon and Wartick 1995). According to this stream, reputation emanates from the discussions or rumours among stakeholders primarily based on their experience with the organization.

As expected, a diverse spectrum of fields such as Strategic Management (Fombrun 1996; Fombrun and Shanley 1990; Weigelt and Camerer 1988), Marketing (Bromley 1993; Dowling 2001), Communication (Morley 2002) (see Logsdon and Wood 2002), Economics, Organizational Theory, Sociology (King and Whetten 2008; Rhee and Valdez 2009; Rindova et al. 2010) and Game Theory have developed the concept further and tried to measure it. Game Theory focuses on getting stakeholders to minimize uncertainty for organizations and their approach to reputation has been to see it as the means to achieve such a minimization. Indeed, as Fombrum and Shanley (1990) note, this has become the preoccupation that characterizes the efforts of both researchers and practitioners in this area because it is believed that: “By showing how previous evaluators have resolved ambivalence in firm’s performance, reputations inform publics about current ambivalence and influence firms’ actions”.

Reputations therefore act as safety nets; “by developing a reputation a new firm can reduce stakeholders’ uncertainty about its quality because reputation...can provide stakeholders with assurance about the firm’s ability to create value” (Rindova et al. 2007). Among other authors who relate organizational reputation to a firm’s prior performance are Jensen and Roy (2008), who suggest that reputations for industry expertise and business integrity are important to the selection of future organizational partners and Dimov et al. (2007), who say that “reputation serves as a signal of future performance based on perceptions of past performance”. In other words, according to these definitions, reputation is a fundamental extension of organizational legitimacy and credibility whereby stakeholders evaluate past actions and records of behaviour.

Reputation is mostly perceived as a relational concept, whereby an external assessor is performing a conscious or unconscious evaluation in order to build impressions and construct their own idea of the firm’s identity. The vocabulary with externals and internals that assess and make conclusions is dominant in the rationalistic tradition. This tendency is manifested in the literature, “reputation is defined as the current assessment of an entity’s desirability as established by some external person or group

of persons" (Standifird 2001). Waddock (2000) propose that "reputation is essentially the external assessment of a company or any other organization held by external stakeholders". Similarly, Brown and Logsdon (1999) view reputation as "the long-term combination of outsiders' assessments about what the organization is, how well it meets its commitments and conforms to stakeholders' expectations, and how effectively its overall performance fits with its sociopolitical environment". What these definitions do not specify is how we categorize the externals or the outsiders particularly in the era of social media, an issue that will be of interest especially when we talk about the process of legitimizing reputation later in the dissertation.

Going back to what reputation has been for organizations, the Resource-based-view (RBV) has been highly influential in defining reputation as an organizational attribute. In this perspective it is presented as a multidimensional single construct whose value is determined by attributes that are both internal and external to the organization (Dowling 2001). Just as the boundaries between insiders and outsiders are overlooked, so too is the question of where reputation takes place. What is considered as an external factor? How do we define the organizational borders? We claim that these definitional confusions arise because of the ontological priorities inherent in the dominant literature on reputation. By re-framing reputation from the perspective of Process Studies we will attempt to overcome these problems.

In many cases, the notions of image, impression, brand or identity are used as conceptual holders for the concept of reputation. Brown et al. (2006) argue that image and reputation refer to what an organization wants others to think about it and what stakeholders actually think about the organization. So far reputation appears as an ambiguous construct that conflates the ideal – what the organization wants others to believe - with the real: what they actually believe. Davies and Miles (1998) reinforce this dichotomy and, drawing on Abratt (1989), present reputation as having three attributes: "personality, what the organization really is, identity, what it says it is and image, what people see it as". As said earlier, these differentiations are rooted in the ontological priorities of the particular approach to reputation adopted.

Is reputation then an individual construction about an organization or a collective impression spread among stakeholders? The macroscopic picture would lead us to institutional theory's standpoint, which characterizes reputation as "a global

impression reflecting the perception of a collective stakeholder group" (Deephouse 2000; Fombrun and Shanley 1990). In order to have an idea of this global impression would it be sufficient to add all 'individual experienced reputations' or is the mechanism at work more complex than that? Fisher and Reuber (2007) assert that "an organization's reputation constitutes an overall, or aggregate, assessment by groups of stakeholders that builds on and transcends particular aspects of the organization's past or future". Hence this view reinforces the collective construction of reputation.

A strong view within the rationalistic school 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. Many researchers have remarked on this relationship: 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; 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.), yet another illustration of how reputation fits in a list of entities among other intangible entities.

In their study Rindova et al. (2005) illustrate the relationship between reputation and performance by proposing that reputation consists of separate dimensions, antecedents and consequences that create value for future exchanges. Similarly Puncheva (2008) expresses the commonsensical importance of reputation management: "there is a general consensus that corporate reputation is a valuable intangible asset that needs to be managed as it influences stakeholders' perceptions and preferences of companies as employment and investment opportunities, as community members, and as suppliers of products and/or services". Thus, according to the rationalistic tradition on reputation, performance seems to be a consequence of good reputation and an antecedent of profitability on the organizational ladder leading to success. This thesis is not questioning which comes first and why, as we are not interested in the process defined as a series of steps, as we will explain later in the chapter.

A favourable conceptualization of reputation evident in the social constructivism tradition is that reputation presents as a social fact. According to this view “reputation is a relational concept, not a property concept or something that can be owned by an actor...It has an emergent and intersubjective quality, rather than being just a collection of individual beliefs, it is based on a far wider range of associations and feelings than just a propensity to cooperate derived from an objective record of past behaviour” (Sharman 2007; see also Chen and Meindl 1991). This view challenges the conventional view of reputation as an asset that belongs to the organization and instead opens up a different palette of perspectives and approaches.

A central theme in this stream of literature on reputation is its relationship to knowledge (see Lichtenhaler and Ernst 2007; Neef 2003 etc.). From a rationalistic standpoint we would say that reputation has been seen as knowledge about a firm’s true characteristics (Fombrun 1996; Hall 1992; Weigelt and Camerer 1988). However, viewing reputation as a social fact, suggests that “reputation is a socially constructed, distributed knowledge phenomenon that creates powerful incentives for good behaviour” (Rein 2005). This stream of literature tends to define reputation in more abstract and open-ended ways focusing more on exploring the theoretical aspects of reputation rather than contributing to organizational reputation management in practice. Scott and Walsham (2005) propose a redefinition of reputation risk in an effort to move beyond static asset-based definitions while attempting to achieve what many other social constructivist researchers seem to ignore: providing practical solutions. To this end they treat reputation as a boundary object which helps researchers “be more specific about the qualities that make reputation strategic in knowledge economies”.

Broadly speaking, both of the main streams of literature on organizational reputation aim to show its multidimensionality as well as identifying its antecedents and outcomes. In their recent review Lange et al. (2011) attempt to comprehensively summarize the streams of reputation research in the management literature in order to overcome a phase marked by uncertainty about definitions and operationalizations and to “to bring theoretical coherence and rigor to the subject area”. With this aim in mind, they identify three dominant conceptualizations 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 or what Rindova calls “prominence”. The second refers to “a distinctive perceptual representation of the firm irrespective of judgment or evaluation” (ibid). The third, generalized favorability, is closer to Institutional Theory and the perception of reputation as the evaluation of an aggregated whole which is socially constructed and immersed in a collectively acceptable social system. Even though the authors note differences in the three dimensions and encourage future scholars to consider more complex relationships, they remain loyal to the vast majority who treat reputation as an asset. Part of the challenge set in this doctoral study is to understand how the emergence of new media has disrupted the existing agenda in reputation research. In the next section of the chapter, the relationship between communication media and reputation is explored in more detail.

### **2.3 Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) and User-Generated Content in the travel sector**

Following the literature that treats reputations as intangible attributes that can be owned, bought, sold and ascribed to other actors, the role of media has been critical in generating reputations. Deephouse (2000) introduces a specific form of reputation by integrating reputation, communication and resource-based theories. In order to measure reputation and its effect on performance he introduces “media reputation” as the “overall evaluation of a firm presented in the media, drawing on mass communication theory”. Back in 2000 social media was not an issue but the equivalent platform was already mature to influence if not create what would constitute good and bad reputation, with good and bad being labels attributed to reputation when perceived as an asset. As Fombrun and Shanley (1990) emphasize, “the media themselves act not only as vehicles for advertising and mirrors of reality reflecting firms’ actions, but also as active agents shaping information through editorials and feature articles”. This early ancestor of reputation paved the way for the next generation of media and technology to play their role.

In this vein, this section presents a variation of reputation, more context- specific and tailored to the study of online virtual communities. Word Of Mouth (hereafter

WOM) relationships come to move reputation to the next level, one step closer to transcending the hierarchical organizational model of owning reputation and losing control over its diffusion. Traditional WOM and rumours are reshaped and repackaged as elements in a new channel with different reach and scope: that new channel is User-Generated content or UGC.

If UGC 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. According to eMarketer (2009), about 155 million of US Internet users are expected to consume some form of UGC by 2013, up from 116 million in 2008<sup>3</sup>. UGC is illustrative of the evolution from the impersonal communication characterized by the 1.0 virtual environment to a more relational and interactive online dynamic. Schegg et al. (2008) note that “these sites are virtual meeting places to exchange experiences and travel souvenirs, transforming the online interaction from a solitary into a social experience”. Especially in the travel sector, the importance of like-minded travellers’ opinions has been proved valuable and claims that UGC reduces uncertainty of a particular kind in a particular way. For example, Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2006) show that consumers put more trust in fellow customers than in content provided by marketing agencies.

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 context UGC is mainly used to refer to reviews and interactions between users on travel platforms, such as TripAdvisor. These sites multiply the power of eWOM at an exponential pace, “recommender websites such as TripAdvisor disseminate WOM recommendations and reviews by travellers widely” (Shegg et al. 2008). In general the degree of influence that different forms of UGC have is important, as Litvin et al. (2008) also note “the contemporary tourist bloggers are rapidly becoming the travel opinion leaders of the electronic age”.

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.emarketer.com/Products/Explore/ReportList.aspx?dsNav=Rpp:25,Nrc:id-1047,N:879,Nr:Type%3AReport>

However, interesting questions arise about the power of those sites and this issue will be explored throughout this doctoral study. Firstly, we can note that reputation and its management, as perceived so far, is experiencing a transformation. Jeacle and Carter (2011) observe this transformation that manifests in the creation of knowledge, “if TripAdvisor is viewed as the overall auditor of hotel quality, then the travellers which contribute to its site might be portrayed as the experts on whom it places its reliance”. What is reliance to begin with? Who used to be the expert and who is the expert nowadays? These are important questions that we will address in chapter seven, where we will look at the process of reputation-making, constitutive part of which is reputation-breaking.

As with most socially constructed concepts, reputation entails multiple facets and its variations differ in each context. In the marketing and consumer behaviour literature reputation has camouflaged as WOM or more specifically it has been regarded as deeply influenced by WOM communication. 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 particular goods and services and/or their sellers”. Both definitions can serve as constitutive aspects of reputation perceived as an asset that can be owned and shared.

Since then many studies have been conducted to identify the relationships between informal communications and rumours and buying decisions and perceptions. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955/ 2006) conclude that WOM was the most important source of influence in the purchase of household goods and food products. Brown and Reingen (1987) extend Granovetter’s theory about strong and weak ties and identify the need to combine network analysis of WOM behaviour with microllevel analysis at the individual level. In this vein Laczniak et al. (2001) focus on the negative impact that WOM had and they studied how consumers responded to negative WOM with the use of attribution theory. In general research on traditional WOM has focused on managerial, socio-psychological and economic aspects.

Although the evolution of the organization from a hierarchical structure to a market-oriented environment and later on to the globalized network has changed the form and shape of WOM, it has not decreased its importance. Indeed, it could be claimed that “[i]n a networked society, word of mouth emerges as a central (not peripheral) phenomenon” (Ozcan 2004), as more people are empowered to express opinions and influence decisions.

### **2.3.1 Online WOM (eWOM)**

As time passes, travellers become sophisticated users and search for the unbiased, candid information that will help them take decisions. Web 2.0 and Travel 2.0 transform travellers into knowledge consumers and “bring together the concept of social networking/ virtual communities and apply it to the tourism industry” (Buhalis and Law 2008). Technology has been a factor of importance with regards to how travel experience has been shaped. Computer Reservation Systems, Global Distribution Systems, Dynamic packaging, multimedia and mobile technologies have added new functionalities and expanded the possibilities in ways that contemporary travellers cannot imagine themselves without. As Buhalis and Law (2008) note, “the development of ICTs and particularly the Internet empowered the “new” tourist who is becoming knowledgeable and is seeking exceptional value for money and time”.

An integral part of Web 2.0 and Travel 2.0 has been the dissemination of opinions and rumours online, what has been coined as eWOM. Hennig-Thurau et al. (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 et al. (2006) and Gretzel and 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 it 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 word-of-mouth 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 an 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 el. (2008) in their comparison to physical WOM assert that it even creates 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”. The claim that online UGC is implicated in reconfiguring reality is a challenging one but nonetheless intriguing particularly in light of the emerging literature on performativity which we review later in this chapter.

To conclude the section about the transformation of reputation in online communities, we can say that eWOM currently has a labyrinthine nature with complex relationships to practice that would be overlooked by mainstream approaches and methods. As we will see later in the thesis WOM has been a key tool to express dissatisfaction. Gelb and Sundaram (2002) argue that eWOM is a useful tool to disseminate complaints about brands, via chat rooms, newsgroups and electronic consumer fora. Organizations then are asked to react through a procedure known as service recovery. Service recovery encompasses the actions taken by an organization to redress a perceived service failure (Grönroos 1988). eWOM thus has put marketing 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. As Baka and Scott (2009) note, “consumer advocacy groups have existed for many years but have tended to assume responsibility for more formal representations to travel companies through committees and petition. User-generated content introduces a different form of representation which is arguably more akin to word-of-mouth”. In the next section we illuminate the differences between treating reputation as a corporate asset that has to be managed and as a process that happens continually irrespective of organizational boundaries.

## **2.4 How reputation management differs from reputation-making**

Before we move on to the theoretical review necessary to understand how this study approaches reputation-making, we will clarify the difference between reputation

management and reputation-making. Although this will become clearer in the next section, when we will differentiate between practice and practicing and between substances and processes, it would make sense here to identify the three key assumptions that the literature on reputation takes for granted and this thesis will revise.

As stated already in section 2.2, the relational perception serves as a departure point to understand how reputation-making unfolds. However what we need to look at is how UGC is shaping reputation-making, why it matters, when, where, how it became important or even visible in the first place and how it has been transformed. Scholars such as Love and Kraatz (2009) have studied reputational change processes and they summarized the underlying change mechanisms under “character”, “symbolic conformity” and “technical efficacy”. The three categories fit broadly within the literature as reported above. Character refers to the traits that external audiences attribute to organizations, symbolic conformity embraces “the socially constructed standards and categories” and technical efficacy relates reputation to financial performance and tangible outputs.

The literature on reputation has been rich in perspectives, conceptualizations, and dimensions. The approach taken by this study builds on the literature on reputational rankings, acknowledges its influence and aims to further unmask the emergent nature of reputation: reputation in the making. In so doing it seeks to transform reputation from a thing to a fluid process. The following taken-for-granted assumptions, found throughout the conventional literature on reputation, will be challenged in the dissertation and form the starting point for our discussion of the difference between reputation and reputation-making:

1. Organizational settings consist of clear groups of internal and external stakeholders, whereby the first act and the latter shape reputations based upon those actions and decisions.
2. A clear distinction among temporal states is assumed; past, present and future are well defined points unproblematically chopped up in most definitions. Acceptable past behavior means good present reputation and future financial growth.
3. There is an ontological differentiation according to which what the organization wants others to believe it is, what externals think it is and what it really is are separate.

The analysis presented in this thesis challenges the separation implicit in the three statements above and instead shifts attention from the concept of reputation to reputation-making. Having reviewed the central concept of reputation and the literature streams related to the context of the study, the next part of the chapter turns into a review of the theoretical underpinnings of the research. We will begin with a review of the practice-based studies and then we will move on to the tenets of Process Theory and the notion of performativity.

## 2.5 The theoretical approach of practice-based studies: from practice to practicing

In this part of the thesis we shift our attention to the theoretical underpinnings that will help us understand how reputation-making differs from perceiving reputation as a construct that can be managed as such. While the main theoretical foundation is Process Theory, we identify some connections between process and practice-based studies that will be informative in the course of the thesis. In the recent years much attention has been given to the concept of practice and practice-based studies have flourished in organizational studies. This section will briefly review the debates surrounding the meaning of practice in order to prepare the ground for its relationship to process and its introduction in the analysis that follows.

The notion of practice has different readings, as we will show. There is a general agreement among social theorists that there is no unified perception of practice theory, but rather a collage of thinkers who broadly adopt a ‘practice approach’ (Postill 2010: p.6). Theodor Schatzki (2001) distinguishes these thinkers into four types: “philosophers (such as Wittgenstein, Dreyfus, or Taylor), social theorists (Bourdieu, Giddens), cultural theorists (Foucault, Lyotard) and theorists of science and technology (Latour, Rouse, Pickering)” (ibid: p.6). Postill goes on to distinguish them into two ‘waves’ of practice theorists with different priorities:

“Whilst the first generation, led by some of the foremost theorists of the twentieth century (e.g. Bourdieu 1977, de Certeau 1984, Foucault 1979, Giddens 1979, 1984) laid the foundations of what we now regard as practice theory, the second generation is currently testing those foundations and building new extensions to the theoretical edifice (Ortner 1984, 2006, Schatzki 1996, Schatzki et al. 2001, Reckwitz 2002, Warde 2005)” (ibid).

In the next section (2.6) we will return to the first generation and illustrate the scholarly work in relation to Process Theory. In this section though, we will focus on the work of scholars who broadly belong to the second ‘wave’ and their efforts to extend the seminal foundations of practice.

Silvia Gherardi (2009) has edited a special issue of the “Management Learning” Journal, which reviews this scholarly terrain and identifies current issues focusing on the theme “The Critical Power of the Practice Lens”. She opens up the discussion by

introducing theories of practice and by pointing out the difference between ‘reading’ practices from outside and from inside. In the first case practices are externally treated as regular, repetitive patterns underlying activities, whereas in the second practices are experienced from the perspective of the practitioners who perform action with temporality, processuality, emergence and openness being the core characteristics of how practices occur. It is this latter definition of practice that focuses on the situated nature of knowing as a ‘practical accomplishment’ or knowing-in-practice which stands as a critique of those theories of knowledge that treat it as preexisting static assets:

“Knowledge as knowing is not the outcome of rational decisions resulting from scientific methods but instead describes a process of continuous enactment, refinement, reproduction and change based on tacitly shared understandings within a practicing community” (Geiger 2009).

What *knowing* suggests in relation to *knowledge* is similar to what practice-based studies have added to the traditional structural and reductionist organizational approaches. As Cook and Brown (1999) put it, “knowledge is about possession, knowing is about relation: it is about interaction between the knower and the world”. They refer to the interplay of knowing and knowledge as a generative dance, and emphasize the need to introduce an epistemology of practice when talking about knowing as action. In the context of the current study, this suggests that knowledge about the validity of reputations is not ‘out there’ ready to be discovered possibly repackaged as ‘truth’, as the rationalistic tradition on reputation would assert, but instead this knowledge is generated through relationships. Therefore the pursuit of knowledge about hotels in the context of online UGC is better presented as the pursuit of relational knowing or becoming informed. In the context of the travel sector and hotels’ reputations it will be argued that “organizational knowing emerg[es] from the ongoing and situated actions of organizational members as they engage the world ( . . . ). All doing is knowing and all knowing is doing” (Orlikowski 2002: pp.249–51).

Since UGC forms a core part of the focus in this study, we need a further position on the development of informal information and for this we turn to Knorr Cetina (2010). She proposes an alternative perspective on the notion of truth emphasizing the

epistemics of information through news and rumour in order to “reflect[s] the transition from a stable natural world to an informational reality”. She shows how information unfolding in the form of rumours which are not necessarily substantiated, has an impact and fuels a series of changes. Knorr Cetina illustrates this by showing how rumours about Osama Bin Laden’s death have influenced the price of oil and the dollar irrespective of their validity.

It is important to pause at this point to explain that by referring to rumours and impact as independent, we do not hope to make the separation, nor to return to the literature streams introduced in the beginning of the chapter on reputation as an asset. We do not imply that there is a universal mechanism to check the validity of claims. The focus of this thesis is how the practice of engaging with such mechanisms transforms the legitimization process and thus what we hold as temporarily legitimate. Legitimate should therefore not be taken as a label but as a contested process that linguistically would be better described with the gerund legitimizing, which is similar to the ongoing transformation of knowledge that is better encapsulated in knowing and is sympathetic to organizational scholars who talk about organizing rather than organizations.

What is the difference between organization and organizing? Organizational theorists who have employed the practice lens to analyze the dynamics of everyday routines and practices have shown the difference in perceiving managerial strategies as stable dispositions as opposed to temporary accomplishments enacted and situated through use (see Orlikowski 1996, 2002, 2007; Feldman and Rafaeli 2002; Feldman 2004; Suchman 2007 etc.). The shift from the organization to organizing, which has been epitomized since Weick transformed Katz and Kahn (1966) book, *The Social Psychology of Organizations* into *The Social Psychology of Organizing* in 1979, turns aside from what the organization and its structure *is* to how it is accomplished (Feldman 2000). Weick (2000: p.306) also introduces ‘enacting’ as a term that: “is used to preserve the central point that when people act they bring events and structures into existence and set them in motion”. In following this transformation Feldman proposes the need for a parallel transformation of the notion of routines. Having acknowledged how fundamental routines have been to organizational work, she extended the work of March and Simon (1958) and Nelson and Winter (1982) and became one of the first scholars to question the taken for granted association of

routines with inertia and stability. In studying organizations ethnographically, she realized that routines were not only related to stability, but rather every routine entailed a degree of change (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011). Her interest then focused on uncovering the interplays between stability and change, whereby change does not come as an aberration of stability but is always interrelated with it.

Towards this direction in her later collaboration with Pentland (2003) they introduce the two aspects of routines, the ostensive and the performative: “The ostensive aspect is the ideal or schematic form of a routine. It is the abstract, generalized idea of the routine, or the routine in principle. The performative aspect of the routine consists of specific actions, by specific people, in specific places and times. It is the routine in practice”. If we draw our attention to the performative aspect, we realize the uniqueness of each enactment. Thus every enactment is unique and different and although “we have an image of routines as relatively fixed, unchanging objects” (ibid), the practice lens illustrates the ‘endless variation’ of routines once they are performed.

As an example, Feldman and Pentland (2003) use the routine of hiring. The ostensive part of the routine of hiring would involve standard procedures such as attracting, screening, and choosing applicants, while the performative reinforces the situated and context-specific nature (each hiring procedure might well involve specific arrangements).

As we move on to the analysis we will pick up similar practices located in travel and hospitality from the perspectives of the hoteliers and the travellers. In this vein we will, for instance, discuss the practice of welcoming guests at the hotel, which can be analysed from the two perspectives. We will note that the travel and hospitality sector has systematized many standard practices (the ostensive aspect) but the art of being a host lies mainly in responsiveness – a performative process. In other words, the practice of hospitality is made manifest through the momentary enactments that are always unique, even in cases we think are repetitive.

Having sketched the key meanings of practice and having established the difference between organization and organizing, it is now time we turn our attention to how the current study will employ practices. In the same manner that we differentiated between the noun and the gerund in the case of the organization and organizing, we

will employ the gerund of practice (practicing) to show the ongoing enactments that constitute our reality. We will thus attempt to understand what is practicing and how it is accomplished. In particular, we want to shed light on four characteristics of practice-based studies adopted and developed here: practices are not only stable dispositions but emergent accomplishments, practices as routines every time happen anew and although they may be repetitive they are always different, practices are produced through a process of ‘mutual constitution’ and practices drive consequentiality in a unique way. We have discussed the first two but let us consider the notions of generativity and consequentiality in more detail.

In discussing how practice is construed, *practicing* does not only appear as what happens in practice, but embraces the notion of generativity and recreation (Yanow 2006; Brown and Duguid 2001), each practicing is unique and even when it follows rules and plans, both the accomplishment and the interpretation are different. In this regard, the seminal work of Lucy Suchman (1987/2007) provides the foundation for criticizing the *ex ante* rationality imbued in plans and counterposes the ‘situated rationality’ that is context- specific and arouses improvisation. She also (2007: p.257) notes the necessity to move beyond thinking of separate components that are then joined together, towards an ontology that “comprises configurations of always already interrelated, reiterated sociomaterial practices”. In this way practices recreate their environment and the structures within which they occur.

This comes as a development of Giddens’ structuration theory, whereby “structure has always to be conceived as a property of social systems, carried in reproduced practices embedded in time and space” (Giddens 1986: p.170). It is the practicing of practices that bridges the gap between structure and agency: “interaction between agents and socially produced structures occurs through recursively situated practices that form part of daily routines” (Jarzabkowski 2004). As Chia and Holt (2006) remind us “the key foci of attention in all these practice-based research approaches are the oftentimes mundane everyday goings-on that lead to organizational strategy formation”. Instead of focusing on the formal and static organizational structures that enable or constrain action, the approach of practice-based studies is to uncover the everyday activities and their situated enactment, which is a priority of this study too.

Going back to generativity, the mutual transformation of the practice and its context

(structure) through practicing is critical in understanding generativity and is clearly addressed by scholars, such as Geiger who maps practice-based studies. Geiger (2009) points out that the literature on practice has centred around two approaches, namely the one that identifies practices with routines and strategy-as practice (Feldman 2000; Jarzabkowski 2004; Mintzberg 1978; Whittington 2006), and the other that defines them as “normative constructs” that both dictate the societal norms as well as allow them to be reproduced and recreated as they are ongoingly practiced. Geiger’s first approach is preoccupied with what actors do in practice, whereby organizations are constitutive of practices through their enactment (Orlikowski 2000; Feldman and Rafaeli 2002; Orr 1996; Tsoukas and Chia 2002).

The second approach according to Geiger (2009) is summarized in the writings of organizational theorists who draw on sociologists (Bourdieu 1972; Foucault 2012; Giddens 1986), activity theorists (Engeström et al., 1999), ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel 1991; Fox 2006) and philosophers (Dewey 2002; Turner 1994). As he argues, this stream of researchers (for instance Elkjaer 2004; Gherardi et al. 2007) acknowledges practice as being “a social collective category” and focuses on the historicity of how norms, values and institutions are practiced and evolve; what Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) call “practices as the primary building blocks of social reality”.

In this latter paper Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) sketch out the key principles and traditions of Practice Theory and delineate their characteristics. In reviewing their engagement with practice, they emphasize that such a lens focuses on the everyday activity of practicing, whereby it is acknowledged that phenomena are “produced through a process of mutual constitution”, what they call ‘the relationality of mutual constitution’:

”The notion of mutual constitution implies that social orders (structures, institutions, routines, etc.) cannot be conceived without understanding the role of agency in producing them, and similarly, agency cannot be understood “simply” as human action, but rather must be understood as always already configured by structural conditions. The ongoing nature of this constitutive relationship indicates that social regularities are always “in the making” (ibid).

In that sense and based on Feldman’s earlier work, routines and practices are treated as generative systems created through the interplays between actions people

undertake and the patterns and structures these actions in turn recreate. In other words, practices are not just acts. Rather, practices are social sites in which events, entities and meaning compose one another (Schatzki 2005). This idea will be further extended with the use of process and performativity later in the chapter.

In the same paper Feldman and Orlikowski readdress the notion of consequentiality of everyday action. They show how through the practice lens we revisit what we usually mean by consequences. We are all familiar with the ‘box- and- arrow figures’ prevalent in organizational depictions and business meetings, where the attention is drawn on where the arrow points to. However, in practice theory, what is of importance, are the arrows themselves: “the relationships and performances that produce outcomes in the world” (ibid). Thus the consequentiality of practices refers both to the temporary outcomes of their situated accomplishment and the generativity they fuel.

The ideas presented here are conceptually close to what Process Theory will suggest in the next section. In particular, the understanding of practices as practicing and the notions of generativity and consequentiality will help us make the necessary steps to perceive the tenet of becoming and the notion of performativity. Having already challenged the rigidity of structure and patterns, it will be easier for us to grasp the relationality and fluidity that Process is distinctive of. Acknowledging this stream of research, we will claim that by analyzing reputation through the prism of Process we gain a more insightful understanding of the interplays between the ways practices are enacted on a micro level – or *practicing* as we have termed this here - and the unintended consequences their performative instantiation might have. While the main contribution of the thesis is to Process Theory, part of the contribution is to connect the two streams (Practice Theory and Process Theory). In linking the two theoretical streams we will present a reconceptualization of reputation as reputation-making, its enactment, and realization challenging traditional methods resting on static terms and discrete measures. The following section will lead us through these ideas and will locate Process Theory in this study.

## 2.6 Process Theory Principles

One of the ways in which this doctoral research differentiates itself from the majority of studies focusing on reputation is through the application of a distinctive theoretical lens for analyzing the central theme of reputation (re-)configurations in the field study conducted. Thus, ensuring a robust understanding of the theoretical preoccupations and ontological priorities are of utmost importance in order to follow the thesis as it unfolds in the chapters that follow. This research has been conducted through the lens of Process Theory and in particular ideas are analyzed with the use of the tenet of ‘becoming’ inspired by Process Studies. In this section we will present the Process approach, explain how it differs from other perspectives, or “styles of thinking” using Chia’s (1995) term, and outline the ways it will be employed. This is a thesis about *becoming*. To understand what becoming embraces, we will first turn our attention to the opposing style of thinking, which rests on *being*.

### 2.6.1 The world of substances

Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, we as humans, have a natural inclination to see things as they *are* and therefore as independent from other things. The chair can stand on its own, the table, the sofa, cushions too. However, when we put them together in space they form another thing that we call living room or lounge. This simple example serves as an introduction to what the world of substances suggests. René Descartes, a seventeenth century French philosopher, following Plato and Aristotle is the most dominant figure who theorized the world as composed of different substances that exist independently of each other:

“By substance, we can understand nothing else than a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist. Substances are also those unchanging realities that stand under (hence sub/stance) their qualities and endure unchanged through the changes of those qualities” (in Mesle 2008: p.44).

Descartes distinguished between physical and mental substances and reinforced the dualistic way of thinking with the most characteristic dichotomy being this between the body and the soul or mind. In this thesis, we make the distinction between the ontology of being derived from the viewpoint of the world of substances described above and the relational ontology that supports *becoming*. To extend the illustration used above, the difference between these two perspectives is that in the ontology of

being one would see the living room as the sum of the discrete and separate objects such as tables, chairs, lamps and so on each of which is functionally defined according to given properties. In a relational ontology, the constitution of a living room is on-going and entangled with practices that give it meaning, in other words in contrast to the former view the living room could not exist separately from these relations. It is this inseparability that supports a relational and interwoven aspect of the world introducing us to a distinctive style of thinking: the ontology of *becoming*.

### **2.6.2 The world as Becoming**

In order to perceive becoming, we need to challenge the philosophies that give primacy to things over processes, to independence over relationality, to stability over flow. Mesle (2008: p.8) reminds us of Heraclitus' words, expressed twenty-five hundred years ago. Heraclitus observed that we can't step in the same river twice and his student, Cratylus, added that we can't even step in the same river once. At the heart of these observations is a call to think more carefully about what we mean by *same* and *different* and whether we are external to phenomena or part of them. As the river flows, it constantly changes and the flow continues when we decide to step into it. But we also change and thus even if the river were unchanged, we would be different. Both the river and ourselves are different every moment, yet the nature of difference is a key point that will be discussed in more detail later in the section. It suffices to note here that if we held to the Cartesian way of thinking we suffice to say how the river was at point A and how it is at point B, and the assemblage of the points (A, B...Z) in time would constitute the river. The logic is similar to the example above about the living room and the things it is consisted of. On the other hand, from the perspective of Process Theory the world is not made up of things but as we will go on to discuss is constitutive of processes and events. To understand this better we will trace the historical development of process theory.

The ontology of becoming draws its inspiration from a tradition of thinkers from Heraclitus to twentieth century philosophers such as James, Bergson and Whitehead, all of whom construed reality as a ceaseless process rather than as a series of unchangeable entities (Nayak and Chia 2011). Whitehead has been a central thinker in the establishment of Process Philosophy and seriously challenged the Cartesian

logic in the twentieth century. If we aim to grasp what process means we have to revisit the fundamental principles that Whitehead introduced.

This endeavour will not be easy, especially considering that this is not a piece of philosophical analysis but a thesis which aims to talk about reputation-making and - breaking as a process. Before we dive into these dense ideas we should keep in mind the challenge that this abstract thinking poses to our common sense. The ways in which we have constructed our language in order to communicate ideas most of the times presupposes the world of substances mentioned above. In order to introduce *becoming* “we must either redefine old words-generating confusion because we keep thinking of their older meanings – or create new ones- generating confusion because they are so foreign” Mesle (2008: p.17). Nevertheless, as Whitehead in his seminal book *Process and Reality* (1929, 1978: p.9) concludes: “in some measure or other, progress is always a transcendence of the obvious”. To transcend the obvious, Process Philosophers redefine notions such as change, difference, process, entity, and introduce notions like concrescence, satisfaction, abstraction which construed the world as always in a process of becoming and perishing. Within the scope of this thesis these terms are appropriated in particular ways, as we will explain in the following lines that need careful definition so that the abstract does not overwhelm our purpose.

The first term that needs careful clarification is the central principle of “process”. Again, this is a word that is often used as part of the vernacular and therefore we are redefining it rather than defining it. When we refer to process in everyday language we tend to mean a procedure with predefined steps that have to be followed in order to achieve an outcome. During these isolatable stages we can pause the procedure and reflect upon the stages. If we take this mode of analysis further, the world rests upon what can be seen, touched, and heard. As Nayak and Chia (2011) note, “according to substance ontology, process is invariably construed as processes of things; they are deliberate doings of discrete individual and organizational entities. Movement and change are construed as a transitory phase between two otherwise identifiable and fixed states”. According to this conventional sense of sequential process, we would thus claim that change indicates the transition from the one fixed state (A) to the other fixed state (B).

Contrary to this conceptualization, we adopt the Process Theory framing of process in which, “[p]rimacy is given to movement, flux and emergence, over that of end states, entities, stability, and discrete periods” (Pettigrew 1992). Studying phenomena from a process standpoint acknowledges and emphasizes their transient, fluid and emergent nature and makes us appreciate that there is nothing between A and B.

Thus the world is constitutive of processes or what Whitehead coins actual entities or occasions. These serve as the building blocks of reality that we experience as a series of events. Whitehead notes that they are “the final real things of which the world is made up” (1929, 1978: p.18 (27)). Whitehead’s ‘real things’ should not be confused with the things in the logic of Plato or Descartes that can be static in some ways and this comes as yet another point where we use a common term imbued with a different meaning. As Whitehead emphasizes:

“The notion of an actual entity as the unchanging subject of change is completely abandoned...the ancient doctrine that “no one crosses the same river twice” is extended. No thinker thinks twice; and, to put the matter more generally, no subject experiences twice” (1929, 1979: p.29).

Discussants of Whitehead elaborate extensively on what actual entities as the fundamentals of Process Theory mean. They make clear the distinction between what an *entity* might mean from the ontology of being and what it means from the standpoint of becoming. Morris (1991:p. 26) points out that “an actual entity is not explicable in terms of “stuff” but is a unifying process that includes past actual entities”. Sherburne (1966: p.8) also clarifies that “an actual entity is a process and is not describable in terms of the morphology of stuff”. Actual entity/ occasion that becomes and perishes is a central term in Whitehead’s theory. It is a “drop or event of space-time, it is a drop of feeling” (Mesle 2008: p.95). Going back to the example of the river, how would the river be conceived as a series of events and why do we experience it as a *becoming* in the flow? The answer that Mesle (ibid: p.96) gives is very critical and will be fundamental to understand the analysis later in the thesis. The answer is that there is nothing between events and actual entities, nor time neither space. The river then is not a cumulative assemblage of drops of water that exist independently and later form a construct called the river but it becomes meaningful only when we look at the river as a unity. This is the principle of process.

“How an actual entity becomes, constitutes what the actual entity is...Its Being is constituted by its Becoming” (Whitehead in Process and Reality p. 23).

So far we have established that according to Process Theory the world is made of actual entities that become and perish as interrelated processes. The question then arises, how do we know they become and perish? And if this is all that happens, how does novelty emerge? Whitehead introduced the notion of ‘concrescence’ to explain how the process of an actual entity becomes concrete or in other words how an actual occasion achieves ‘a complex unity’ (Morris 1991: p.24). As already noted, the complex unity does not happen because independent components come together, but there is nothing else to be seen other than the unity. Whitehead is clear about it:

“Concrescence is the name for the process in which the universe of many things acquires an individual unity...There are not the concrescence and the novel thing: when we analyse the novel thing we find nothing but the concrescence. Actuality means nothing else than this ultimate entry into the concrete” (1929, 1979: p.211).

Admittedly this is a hard point to absorb and it is even harder to concretize it within the organizational context. Later in the thesis we will discuss how reputation-making is enacted through moments of making and breaking rather than through *ad hoc* decisions encapsulating independent rules repackaged as what we might call reputation management. It is the enactment of management practices that makes reputation meaningful. The discussion so far has been limited to an ontological level of what the world *is* or what it *becomes*. However, these abstract ontological concerns will orientate us towards revisiting reputation as a phenomenon in the making. In this sense it is important to realize the subtle differences discussed here and to familiarize ourselves with the vocabulary employed.

### **2.6.3 Common concepts revisited from the perspective of process and becoming**

It is in the pages of this section that we sketch out the map explaining what common words like change will mean later in the thesis.

Going back to actual entities, we now know that they are in an ongoing process of becoming, yet they perish by achieving their subjective aim: “This final unity is termed the satisfaction” (1929, 1979: p.212). The closure or completion that

perishing implies, comes as an initial surprise in a context of continuous flow, where there is neither beginning nor end. But satisfaction is only an abstraction from the process of becoming; it is what Whitehead (1929, 1979: p.84) calls ‘both the process and the outcome’:

“The notion of satisfaction is the notion of the ‘entity as concrete’ abstracted from the process of concrescence; it is the outcome separated from the process, thereby losing the actuality of the atomic entity, which is both process and outcome”.

The satisfaction is thus the last stage of an occasion, which should not be considered as existentially or ontologically separable from the process. Such a separation would after all refer back to Cartesian dualisms.

Whitehead has indeed been criticized for adopting terms and concepts he was intending to overturn (see Jones J. 1998: p.23). However, he himself had foreseen this confusion when he identified the challenges language would inescapably impose. When Whitehead refers to outcomes he does not mean independent substances, this is exactly what he wants to overcome. The dualistic perception that presupposes an independence of things and substances is what he denies in favour of an understanding of entities existing in *societies*, or in other words in meaningful relations or interrelated webs. Furthermore, events and actual entities do not happen in space and time as if space and time existed already and independently. Mesle (2008: p.43) casts some light on the role of time and space:

“Process philosophers, like modern physicists, reject the Newtonian view that time and space exist as some fixed background or framework separate from the events that happen within them as if time and space form a bottle around us that would still exist even if all events disappeared. Time *is* the passage –the becoming and perishing- of events”.

Having clarified that *outcomes* do not serve as the results in a fixed equation or as the consequences arising from causality and having said that time does not exist in a vacuum, we return to what satisfaction implies. Satisfaction appears as the temporary closure, as “a process in the course of which many operations with incomplete subjective unity terminate in a completed unity of operation” (Sherburne 1966: p.14). Satisfaction is thus an abstraction from the concrescence and from the perpetual becoming of occasions. Actual occasions then become what they are “in momentary processes of concrescence ...and upon fully achieving this status they at once perish.

The moment of becoming of an actual entity is also its moment of perishing" (Rosenthal 2000: p.10). *Satisfaction* is not the only abstraction in Whitehead's terminology. If the world is built up only of actual entities "whatever things there are in any sense of 'existence' are derived by abstraction from actual occasions" (ibid: p.18). Interestingly process philosophers and Whitehead in particular are not just preoccupied with how everything that exists is connected but with "how everything that could possibly exist is connected" (Mesle 2008: p.13). This is relevant because the notion of abstraction is not limited to 'actuality' but embraces 'possibility' too.

To conclude on how becoming is employed, the tenet of becoming in the study reveals important considerations with regard to formative reputation and the themes associated with it. Although Process Studies are conceptually sympathetic to the "practice lens" it pursues different ontological priorities. What counts most is not necessarily how people enact structures in their use of technology, but to study the world "as process, where entities, as far as they are seen to exist, are products of processes rather than existing prior to them" (Bakken and Hernes 2006). The focal level in understanding Process Theory and this study is to realize that entities and processes are open products that will be further reconstituted and will form new processes and new entities. Thus phenomena and reputation-making in particular are studied in the light of the acknowledgement that they are always on the move – they become - and as they come together they produce temporary products (*satisfaction* is achieved) that again in their turn reconstitute the phenomena or processes that created them or made them visible and appreciable in the first place.

How this process of becoming can be abstracted and with what outcomes for organizations and managers in the travel sector is the focus of the sixth chapter, when we examine the legitimization process of reputation-making through seemingly opposing ends. If we hope to understand reputation practices from a processual lens, we have to turn aside from labeling extreme ends such as positive and negative. Nevertheless, "the double movement of positive and negative, something and nothing, presence and absence, up and down, uncovering and concealing, truth and oblivion, articulate a processual approach" (Nayak 2008). Negative and positive are temporary and contested labels as we will see.

The thorough discussion about what process means and where it is based upon has been critical to understand the key themes of Process Theory that form the backbone of becoming. Prior to a more focused presentation of them, it would make sense to summarize the concepts, the understanding of which facilitates a better understanding of the world of becoming as opposed to the world of substance. In this review of Process Theory we reintroduced what *process* means in this context and why it makes a difference to treat it as the ongoing movement, as a river that flows without beginning or end from treating it as a procedure with identifiable moments of pauses and transitions, with the second being the Cartesian interpretation. In redefining process we also revisited the notions of *change* and *entities*, both important in the course of the thesis. Change will be further analysed in the next section, while entities are the fundamentals of process or in other words processes themselves that should not be confused with things, stuff or substances. For the sake of a thorough presentation of Process Theory, we also introduced Whitehead's complex notions of *concrescence* and *satisfaction*, both of which although very illuminating in understanding what it means for an entity to become and perish are not going to be further discussed in the following chapters. In the last three subsections that follow we focus exactly on what we take forward from the discussion above, namely the concept of abstraction, the generative mechanism of process and the processual nature of change.

#### 2.6.4 Abstraction

Although in Whitehead's analysis abstractions are ontological, in this thesis we will employ the notion of abstraction in order to communicate the analytical cuts we perform in the course of becoming. We are by now aware that we cannot step in the same river twice -or even once- and that the river keeps moving but we consciously assume that we can realize the moment we step in in the river. Abstractions help us perceive the world not only through what happens, but also through what could possibly happen. We acknowledge that the river flows as an ongoing process, but we also assume that we enact the crossing of the river when we step in it. From a Process perspective, we cannot pause its movement, nor can we identify where and when the crossing happens but we pretend we could. Here lies yet another difficulty that challenges our common thinking. Although we are familiar with ontologies and epistemologies that would define what the river *is* and how we have access to it

respectively, process moves beyond these separations. The difference lies in the fact that from a process perspective the one defines the other and neither exists primarily or independently. Nothing thus exists independent of our engagement with it or the potentiality of us engaging with it. To use another example, when looking at the living room, we do not see table, chairs and cushions but the living room as a meaningful unity. It is not constituted by elements but it is rather an actual occasion constitutive of them as events.

Even if we say that ontology and epistemology are not separable through the processual prism, we still make sense of the river independently of us. In a similar logic we will talk about reputation-making and –taking as if they were identifiable instances, which they are not if we adopt the perspective of becoming. Thus the abstractions undertaken in the thesis serve as the acts through which we temporarily pretend we decontextualize the fuzzy phenomenon. In the subsequent chapters we will talk about people and organizations as if they were separable from the unity. Nayak and Chia (2011:p.281) describe this artificial act: “social entities such as individuals and organizations are construed as temporarily stabilized event clusters abstracted from a sea of constant flux and change”. In order to grasp the idea of process, it is necessary to abandon sequential, linear logic and view phenomena from a perspective in which beginning and ending are analytical constructs in a continual unfolding. In so doing we need to move beyond inputs and outputs or products of actors’ doings and try to “arrest moments in this fuzziness”, as Tsoukas and Chia (2003) encourage us to do.

In order to better understand the role of abstractions, it would make sense to juxtapose again the world of substances and the world of becoming. If this were a thesis resting on a world of substances, we would probably say that abstractions would help us pause the phenomenon in order to describe it. But the world does not become what it is out of context, a claim that we will analyze further in the section on performativity. From the standpoint of becoming we experience the process as we enact it and therefore every time we enact the world it is a different a world. Our favourite quotation from Heraclitus will once again make notions clearer: We cannot step in the same river twice. Abstractions will not help us pause the world to describe it because in so doing we would create a different world. This is similar to what we said about points A and B earlier and the difference in perceiving the river as the sum

of drops from treating it as a continuous flow. Becoming urges us to realize that there is nothing between the two points of reference (or the two drops), as through process we always recreate them and hence we do not connect them. Even when we attempt to talk about A (for example a travel experience), we recreate it or in other words we create a different experience.

This is what we call the generative mechanism of process. The inability to represent what has been enacted or what could potentially be, makes us move beyond representation onto re-creation. As this is a significant turn in Process Theory and in the thesis, let us look at it in more detail.

### **2.6.5 The generative mechanism of process**

The notion of generativity has been earlier introduced in the section on Practice, yet we revisit it here and we will come back to it in the final section on performativity. We, as humans in the pursuit of understanding the world, are familiar with many kinds of dualities mostly in favour of the world of substances. Immanuel Kant ([1899] 2007) for instance, one of the most famous philosophers of the Enlightenment, distinguishes between the ‘noumenal’ and the ‘phenomenal’ world, the one embraces what the world is –things in themselves- whereas the second embraces our experience of it. We have already acquainted ourselves with Descartes’ dualism of substances and the clear-cut difference between object and subject prevailing in many of the contemporary philosophical discussions. Even in contexts, where the aim has been to overcome dualities and transcend the existential superiority of the subject compared to the object –see Actor Network Theory, which does not differentiate between actors and actants but only sees interdependent networks- the dualism has endured. The reason why it is difficult to transcend dualisms of thought is that we take for granted their existence and having compromised with that we then attempt to overcome them. Process, however, is understood as a lens through which such dualities have not been an issue in the first place. As Mesle (2008: p.60) poetically puts it, “I push and the world pushed back” and we continue, and in so doing I become a different person in the world and the world becomes a different world too.

This generative mechanism of process develops as a logical progression from the analytical construct of abstraction. During abstraction we are conscious that we

disturb the flow; “we chop up reality into discrete pieces to aid linguistic representation and in so doing inevitably distort or leave out vital aspects of our lived experiences” (Nayak and Chia 2011). Whitehead has named the cruel detachment of abstractions as “the fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness”([1929] 1978: 18). What Whitehead means with this fallacy is the pitfalls that the analytical abstractions might have. As Bakken and Hernes (2006) say: “As we create these abstractions, they tend to shape subsequent events and thus influence those events as processes of convergence”. We create the abstractions to better understand the process but when these get disconnected from the processes that created them, we end up with Whitehead’s fallacy.

Admittedly, it has proven hard to analytically and methodologically overcome this fallacy. To this end we try not to treat the unit of analysis, TripAdvisor, as a detached entity, but rather as an unfolding process with multiple identities. In this vein the methodological chapter will give an account of the creation of data rather than of the collection, as if data were out there ready to be collected by anyone. As the analysis unfolds we will show how the processual logic helps us perceive phenomena differently.

In the first chapter of analysis we introduce the notion of place-making, as a proposed alternative to our understanding of places as being fixed and separate (online, offline). Through the lens of process, places become what they are as we enact them. In what follows, we aim to explain how the concepts that UGC websites have intensified and reconfigured – such as reputation-making, processes of legitimization, travelling – are not seen as attributes any more (not as reputation, service recovery, legitimacy, tourism) but as formative interrelated processes. Processes therefore do not occur “within or between social entities”, yet processes “enact and re-enact these social entities into existence” (Chia 1995). As such, process is not the result of the interactions between actors and entities but reconstitutes them and justifies their existence. This creates a fundamental difference from studies in information systems that, for example, use Structuration Theory which in an effort to overcome the duality between agency and structure views them as “a mutually interacting duality” (see Jones M. 1998).

Although the fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness has a negative connotation, we claim that there is a creative generative mechanism attached to studying phenomena processually. As it will be discussed in the next section of the chapter, performativity is a concept consistent with these ideas as it acknowledges the process of authentic creation and generation in an effort to explain a situation. When we attempt to abstract and theorize a phenomenon that is in motion we unavoidably recreate what we aimed to depict. Building on this ground, we harmonize the notion of performativity with ideas inspired by theorists of space [Massey (1999; 2005), Thrift (2004) and Simonsen (2008)]. Having introduced the tenet of abstraction and its generativity, we now turn our attention to the nature of change and thus novelty and creativity.

### **2.6.6 The processual nature of change**

The theme of change is pivotal in Process Theory. This resonates with the overall research question addressed in this study about how UGC websites have changed organizational reputation-making in the travel sector. The analysis is therefore inextricably bound up with the nature of change and transformation since the emergence of the new technological platform. During this process of reconstitution and transformation, change occurs in interesting ways and in different degrees that lend some urgency to trace the ‘hows’ and with what outcomes.

Whitehead in his book *Process and Reality* (1929) differentiates between simple and sophisticated processes. The first “transfer the occurrences of the past into the future with relatively little change in their essential character”, whereas the second “engender greater novelty and originality which is transmitted to future generations of processes” (Cronshaw 2011). Contemporary organizational theorists have employed the processual perspective to explain organizational phenomena. Langley (1999; 2007) summarizes the priorities of process research by saying that “it is concerned with understanding how things evolve over time and why they evolve in this way”. She attempts to show how methodology and theory creation are intertwined and emphasizes the active role of the researcher in the process of change. Tsoukas (2001) also notes that the challenge ahead is to understand “how stability and change, routines and novelty, exploitation and exploration are interwoven and feed on one another”, which is a similar account to the one suggested by Listead and Thanem (2007) who claim that “the organization is itself a dynamic quality and that

change and organization are imbricated in each other". Change and organization are imbricated in each other or as Chia (2002) more strongly puts it, all we have is change: "change is reality itself and organizations are nothing more than temporary arrestations in a sea of flux and transformation".

As Nayak and Chia note (2011: p.292), eminent organizational theorists have attempted to address the question: "how do things and events unfold over time? (Feldman 2000; Pettigrew 1992; Van de Ven and Poole 1995, 2005). However, process studies take the view that in order to provide an answer we need to employ "an even more radically process-oriented approach to organizational change" (Nayak and Chia 2011: p.292). The current piece of work responds to this invitation and, inspired by how process theorists have analyzed change, will primarily draw on a study of Tsoukas and Chia (2002) to discuss how reputation-making has changed through "microscopic changes". Such changes "occur naturally, incrementally and inexorably through creep, slippage and drift as well as natural spread". After we analyze how microscopic changes happen on an everyday basis within the dynamic travel sector we will conclude that reputation-making as a phenomenon has changed yet remained the same. The oxymorous conclusion is consistent with the processual style of thinking. Gioia et al. (2000) note that even though labels might remain the same, what is constitutive of practices consistent with those labels subjects to multiple and variable interpretations thus providing a way to presume that practices are stable same while changing. In the thesis, this insight is used as the basis for developing fresh approaches to reputation-making. This is what we aim to do, but in order to understand the ideas later in the study we first have to discuss change and movement in more detail.

What is change? Is it the opposite of fixity and stability or would this be yet another dichotomy? Helin (2010) encourages us to think beyond "the often taken for granted misconception that newness and stability are dichotomies and instead embrace them as constituents of each other". In process theory no extreme ends are acknowledged but they are mutually implied. Just as actuality implies possibility, concrescence implies satisfaction, becoming implies perishing, indeterminacy implies fixity so, in the same way, continuity implies novelty and creativity. Sherburne (1996: pp.33-34) gives an account of creativity as "that ultimate principle by which the many which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the universe

conjunctively". As we attempted to show, through process we do not see entities as separate, disjunctive units that would potentially come together because they are always already in some form of relation and this conjunction is creative.

Deleuze et al. (1987) explain "becoming" as moving away from one notion and landing on another, as moving from the one moment and creating a new moment. They call these processes deterritorialization and re-territorialization respectively. We therefore witness a recreation in the moment. From the stance of the world of substances we would describe novelty and change through a comparison with its old nature but this is not the case in this context. Let us take for example how a person changes. Gunton ([1978] 2001: p.73) eloquently shows that through 'becoming' and process the person becomes a different person in time:

"A person for instance is a series of events that happen and are constitutive of someone's reality. The person then is recreated in time: there is a new self at each moment, partly inclusive of the old experiences, not an old self with partly new experiences".

Then again, what is change? Tsoukas and Chia (2002) note that "change has been a time-old philosophical puzzle" and remind us of Zeno's famous paradox: "The fast runner Achilles can never overtake the slow moving tortoise; for by the time Achilles reaches the tortoise's starting point, the tortoise has already moved ahead of that starting point, and by the time Achilles reaches the tortoise's new position, the tortoise will have moved on, and so on ad infinitum". This is similar to Heraclitus' river that is never the same and illustrates the ongoing movement and our inability to pause it. The question then would be whether we are external to movement or part of it and hence whether we are always on the move too. This subtle difference will become clearer if we touch upon what change and movement mean through process in this study. In order to understand movement we will draw upon Bergson's ideas and then Deleuze's objection with the use of the example of the cinema.

In stating the fundamental difference in the perception of movement and change in the different styles of thinking, Bergson notes that one could possibly *ex-post* analyze movement by looking at the different positions of the route but would fail in reaching mobility by juxtaposing the sum of the different positions (see Moulard- Leonard 2008: p.5). This observation resembles what we said about the river above (on the

one hand the river as being the sum of drops and on the other the river as being a continuous flow) which summarizes what movement is according to the Cartesian thinking or the ontology of being as opposed to this of process and becoming. Bergson uses the example of the cinematography to claim that the best the cinema can do is artificially reconstitute movement:

“This is what the cinematograph does. With photographs, each of which represents the regiment in a fixed attitude, it reconstitutes the mobility of the regiment marching (1920/ 2003: p.322).... Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially” (ibid).

Hence, this would indicate an attempt to depict ‘becoming’ by adding together many instances of ‘being’, which is exactly what process tries to overcome and this section hopes to communicate. But if not as an assemblage of fixed photographs that all put in a raw to produce the moving picture, how else can we describe cinematography? For Deleuze “cinematographic perception works continuously in a single movement” (Moulard- Leonard 2008: p.106). Although both Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze are considered among the most influential Process Philosophers they seem to disagree about the role of the cinema as an illustration of movement. Bergson claims that we witness an artificial mobility added externally from without, whereas Deleuze focuses on the inherent production of the image and nothing beyond and above it. He says:

“Because Bergson only considered what happened in the apparatus (the homogenous abstract movement of the procession of images) he believed the cinema to be incapable of that which the apparatus is in fact most eminently capable of: the movement-image - that is, pure movement extracted from bodies or moving things. This is not an abstraction but an emancipation” (2005: p.24).

The goal here is not to conclude what the cinema is and how movement is produced, but to understand the difference in perceiving movement as an assemblage of stable dispositions or patterns from treating movement as purely what we have and what we are part of. Admittedly the discussion seems to be moving from the ontological onto epistemological terrain without really setting a line between the two. But as we have shown, this is part of what Process manages to achieve: to overcome the dichotomy between what there *is* and what/ how/ whether we have access to it. We assert that there is no fixed reality out there ready –or not- to be explored, rather reality is

always recreated and transformed in the moment; it only happens once we enact it and because we enact it. With this in mind the next section will present performativity and its relation to process. Prior to this, the following table summarizes the basic principles of Process theory, along with the themes we will carry along in the subsequent chapters.

Process Theory principles	How these principles have been employed in the thesis
The construct of abstraction	Abstractions help us document how we recreate the phenomenon of reputation-making as we enact it. (It is an enactment, not a discovery)
The processual nature of change	Studying change through the prism of process focuses on the constitutive nature of change; the 'hows' and the outcomes that UGC had for reputation-making. We will see how microscopic changes affect everyday practices and in so doing how they become <i>different</i> practices.
The tenet of Becoming	Entities are treated as open processes that will be further reconstituted. The most striking example of this realization is the contested nature of 'positive' and 'negative' reviews which have reconfigured the legitimization process of reputation in an ever dynamic sector.
The generative mechanism of process	Drawing on the notion of performativity that is consistent with Process we discuss reputation managing as becoming in a parallel way to place making. Reputation-making does not happen in empty space but along with place-making.

Table 2 Key tenets of Process Theory

## 2.7 Rating and ranking mechanisms and the notion of performativity

### 2.7.1 Introduction

The theoretical backbone of the thesis draws on the principles of Process Theory, which as we have claimed is in sympathy with the practice-based studies. The two previous sections have attempted to explain the fundamentals underpinning the ideas that will be developed in the following chapters, but they have also prepared the ground for this final section on performativity that serves as a different way of interpreting the process perspective. Before we dive into what the notion of performativity is and how it fits within the thesis, we will briefly restate those ideas carried from the previous sections that form the purview of the discussion on performativity.

We begin by revisiting the concept of generativity introduced earlier. In discussing the concept of practice we emphasized that practices are not just what people do but what we realize every time practices are performed in their endless variation, both in terms of the ways in which they are accomplished as well as their interpretation. Therefore, we cannot talk of the same practice (for instance the practice of hiring), because every time it is enacted differently in practice. Following this line of argument we can agree that even when we talk about the repetition of a practice, the multiplicity of enactments transforms the repetition into different practices. This logic connects with Feldman's differentiation between the ostensive part (the practice in theory) and the performative one (how it is accomplished), and illustrates Heraclitus classical observation about the impossibility of stepping in the same river twice.

This brief summary provides the basis for our understanding of the notion of generativity however, in order to grasp it in depth, our emphasis turns to how we conceptualize the consequentiality of performing practices. On the one hand we witness temporary outcomes, for instance the practice of hiring might lead to the recruitment of a new employee, while on the other we witness the re-creation of the practice itself: through performing the practice of hiring we reconsider what hiring was and rather than describing the practice as a specific procedure we end up revising the procedure anew each time we perform it. Thus generativity refers to the twofold nature of instantiating the practice: it encapsulates the temporary outcomes, yet it refers back to the reconsideration of what the practice is; what Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) coined the “process of mutual constitution”.

It is important not to confuse the notion of consequentiality, as discussed in a previous section on practice (see section 2.5), with end-products and results, a point which is further elaborated by the principles of Process Theory. In the course of the discussion in the Process section we touched upon Whitehead's 'satisfaction', a term that encapsulates what happens when the 'entity' (again as defined by Whitehead) is both the process and the outcome. We then problematized how a phenomenon can be both a process and an outcome. The answer arises when we think of phenomena as always becoming and on the move. It is only then that we are able to interpret their multiple instantiations as temporary outcomes that in turn give rise to other outcomes, not as a series of events. While being always on the move we become

different and even when we look at the temporary outcomes, what brought them to the fore has already been transformed. This reminds us of what Mesle (2008: p.60) said, “I push and the world pushed back”, which is an apt way to introduce the notion of performativity.

### **2.7.2 Performativity in the linguistic context**

The notion of performativity is critical to understanding the ideas developed later in the thesis. Therefore in what follows, we present a review of the different ways in which it has been understood. Performativity embraces how the efforts to represent a case shape it beyond mere representation and embody what they seek to describe. As Sullivan (2011: p.7) puts it: “Something is performative when a performance intending to bring something into being, brings it into being”. If this sounds too abstract to the reader, an effort to concretize performativity –employing its early definition in the linguistic context- comes from Bialasiewicz et al. (2007):

“Performative means that discourses constitute the objects of which they speak. For example [Nation] states are made possible by a wide range of discursive practices that include immigration policies, military deployments, and strategies, cultural debates about normal social behaviour, political speeches and economic investments”.

In this example, ‘states’ come into being through the practices that are constitutive of them. The ways in which we define the state are bound up with the ways these practices are accomplished. Searle (1969: p.33) also distinguishes between two sorts of rules, the regulative ones that “regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of behaviour” and the constitutive rules that not only regulate existing norms but have the power to create new forms of behaviour. He gives the examples of football and chess to show that their rules do not only tell us how to play football or chess but create the very possibility of playing them. This is why the notion of generativity facilitates our understanding of performativity. If we had not perceived generativity we would easily say that there is a chronological order to the definition of a state or the rules of chess; we first introduce the ‘state’ (or chess), what it means and how it functions and then we put into force the various supportive practices. But what performativity adds to our understanding is this recreation of the seemingly agreed structure that happens every time we enact the practices and we witness the iteration of norms. In this regard, theories and models transform the settings they

describe (Hugh 2002) and thus new ways of knowing open up; performativity “promises to make knowable things that hitherto were unknowable”(ibid). Seel (1994) notes that:

“The strength and the meaning of a truth claim varies with the type of evidence or argument we can adduce in support of the assertions in question. But the claim, irrespective of its strength, always implies that the state of things is as the sentence says when it is asserted at a certain point in time”.

The use of words thus appears as powerful as what they aim to capture. Reinelt (2002) emphasizes that to utter a sentence we do not describe what we did but we actually do it. Therefore words create a situation, a state, an identity or a social fact and in a way are ‘instruments for negotiating with reality’ (Begam 2007). This should not suggest that there is a fixed reality and through performing it we present it in a preferable way. As we also discussed in the previous section on Process, we witness a coalition of ontology and epistemology or as expressed in the Practice section a process of mutual constitution. Turnbull (2009) puts it:

“Knowledge of the world is shaped by the structures of the society that produces it, and that society is conjointly shaped by the ways we have developed for knowing the world”.

Indeed, it is this section that Practice, Process and Performativity meet up to illuminate becoming. But let us for now return to performativity. Originally, performativity theory roots back in ‘performative utterances’. A concept first described by Austin (1975) who distinguishes between constatives and performatives: “a constative describes a situation, or states a “fact” or a “truth”, such as ‘the cat sat on the mat’. A performative, on the other hand, is a statement in which in “saying something we do something...In saying what I do, I actually perform the action”(1962: p.108); ‘I name this ship Queen Elizabeth’. Within the performatives category he further “distinguished between locutionary speech acts which utter and illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts which accompany or create actions” (Dong 2007); “the uttering of the [performative] sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of the action” (Begam 2007). Some utterances are only meaningful because of the normative governance that presupposes them. For instance, the “I do” in the marriage ceremony is never uttered *ex nihilo*:

“it only has performative powers due to its ‘accumulation of the force of authority through the repetition of a prior, authoritative set of practices’. Its force has been instantiated through repetition, and all previous utterances of the term provide the citational background against which any given utterance of the vow is recited” (Sullivan 2011: p.12).

This citational background allows us to talk about the performativity of practices and to focus on that rather than the performative power of language itself. To progress the argument, in uttering I am baptizing the child X, I am enacting the baptism, yet this only becomes meaningful because of the past history that the practice has acquired over time.

### **2.7.3 Performativity as iteration of norms**

Judith Butler’s use of the term performativity emphasizes normative governance and she is one of the first scholars to extend performativity beyond linguistic acts. She suggests “that a performative is both an agent and a product of the social and political surroundings in which it circulates” (Herman et al. 2006). She takes a different position from Austin’s theory by asserting that in order to bring agency into being “recitation and repetition of the performative utterance” (Morrissey 2006) is needed. As she claims (1993: p.234), “a performative is a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’ ”. Butler, having acknowledged Jacques Derrida’s notion of repetition, explains that repetition “inheres even within an apparently isolated act or event” (Kirby 2006: p.78) and emphasizes that when we perform practices we somehow act or think according to rule-bound settings that preexist and orientate us.

However, it would be misleading to take those settings for granted, as it is through repetition that we make them meaningful. Butler notes that “the subject, the self, the individual, are just so many false concepts, since they transform into substances fictitious unities having at the start only a linguistic reality” (1990: p.21). She therefore turns our attention to the barriers language imposes and encourages us to liberate our understanding beyond and above them and to rather appreciate the openness of language. As Kirby (2006: p.68) points out, “Butler’s point is that if language and discourse constitute the meaningful dimension of lived reality, and there are many meanings, then the enclosure of language is not a prison-house: on

the contrary, language and representation are fluid structures whose internal complexities allow different outcomes and possibilities". Many times these different outcomes and possibilities challenge our perception of what is legitimate and Butler encourages the ongoing negotiation of legitimacy through performativity: "the resignification of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms" (1997: p.41). In chapter six we will come back to the process of legitimation and we will respond to her call to negotiate legitimacy.

What Butler is most noted for, is her performative ontology of gender and identity construction as contingent and instantiated through iteration and imitation. In her best-known book *Gender Trouble* but also in her second book *Subjects of Desire*, she critically examines categories of identity and questions the self-evident nature of sexuality, gender and identity. She suggests that these categories are performative in the sense that they become what they are through the enactment of practices that we have associated them with:

"Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative, suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (1990: p.136).

If we accept that such 'categories' have no ontological priority and extend this thought to more 'categories', then why have we historically been attempting to represent reality in various ways, including language? The interconnection between language and action that extends our thinking to the interrelationship between reality and representation as summarized by Butler below, nicely progresses Heraclitus' observation about the river, mentioned several times here, and in broad the principles of Process Theory. Butler says:

...."We claim that language acts, and acts against us, and the claim we make is a further instance of language, one which seeks to arrest the force of the prior instance. Thus we exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force, caught up in a bind that no act of censorship can undo" (1997: p.1).

Following a similar argumentative logic, the impossibility to step in the same river twice, implies the impossibility to arrest a previous instance by talking about it; we

inevitably recreate what we aim to describe. In other words, in our effort to re-present, we re-create.

#### **2.7.4 The difference between *re-presenting* and *re-creating***

Returning to the performativity literature, we note that beyond linguistic and gender performativity lies Lyotard's 'principle of optimal performance' which aims to capture the compromise between the "efficient" and the "truth" (Spicer et al. 2009). For Lyotard (1984: p.11), performativity is "[T]he optimization of the global relationship between input and output". According to his theory, knowledge produced performatively gains legitimacy not because it is true, but "because it has a technical value associated with producing results" (*ibid*). This resonates with recent work by Knorr Cetina who explores the epistemics of information in the context of markets. Using examples of news stories and trading practices, she is able to give further emphasis to the consequentiality of performativity, framing it as 'what happens through our efforts to explain what is happening'.

The markets have provided multiple empirical illustrations for theorists of performativity. Barnes (2008) for instance comments on MacKenzie's traders and the way they experience performativity or in other words the way in which they embody the creation of reality in their effort to theorize it: "At these sites (meaning Wall Street or London Stock Exchange), young men and women perform markets through their bodily gestures, their clothing choices and accessories, and perhaps most importantly at their computer screens by applying theories and models of economists". MacKenzie highlights the ways in which the Black-Scholes-Merton model was entangled in the agency and structure of trading in the markets, rather than merely being an inert tool supporting execution: "the model was a theoretical innovation, not simply an empirical observation; that the model's relation to the market was not always passive, but sometimes active; that its role was not always descriptive, but sometimes performative. . . An engine not a camera" (MacKenzie 2006: p.259). So, the model was powerful enough to drive and create (engine) rather than to simply capture and represent (camera).

The reader may be wondering how these ideas are related to reputation-making. Before showing the links, we will turn our attention to performativity in the context of geography. Since the first analysis chapter will focus on the spatial dimension of

reputation-making, it follows that we must first introduce how place can be performed.

The performativity of places primarily lies in their open and mobile definition. Places, contrary to a fixed Cartesian definition that separates them from the people visiting and inhabiting them are always on the move, in a process of transformation. According to Hannam et al. (2006), “places are thus not so much fixed but are implicated within complex networks by which ‘hosts, guests, buildings, objects and machines’ are contingently brought together to produce certain performances in certain places at certain times”. According to Spicer (2009) places are created through performative discourse, whereby “performativity involves an ongoing process of acting and enacting a discourse in different ways”. The openness and multiplicity are central to performativity: “To say that space is performative is not to claim that anything can happen: rather, it is to become open to the possibility that we do not quite know what might happen, where, how, or when” (McCormack 2009). Following this line of argument, the only way to know what the place *is* would then be to perform it. But how is place performed?

An illustration of performing place is presented in Conradson’s (2003) study. The author shares the sense of place in the Ellesmere House, a community drop-in centre in New Zealand: “Soon the hall is relatively empty, the kitchen clean, the people gone. And yet somehow the sociality of an hour ago still makes itself felt” (ibid). He describes the performativity in the atmosphere as volunteers, staff and users encounter each other, “the materials in the room -the seating, the guitars, the balls- were central elements in this performative unfolding (ibid). People develop relationships among each other and with the environment and every time they visit the place, they perform it in many different ways through these relationships and their multiplicity; every time it becomes a different place for them.

A further example to help us perceive the performativity of place is mapping. The act of drawing maps – the practice of mapping - is a key part of understanding the openness of the phenomena that they aim to capture. A first reading of their purpose would possibly define them as representation tools which aim to orientate their ‘readers’ presupposing an agreed spatial reality. They usually serve as the end results of a procedure called cartography. For example the Mercator Projection map was

initially designed to facilitate nautical navigation. However, a performative approach “sees mapping as not only taking place in time and space, but also capable of constituting both” (Perkins 2009). The performativity of the map lies in its multiple readings and departing from the starting point that we should treat it as a potential option rather than as the only and final representation. As Sullivan (2011: p.102) notes, “what the map reflects is not *this* world, but an alternative one, with the map alluding to a world that will exist once the possibilities entailed in the map are performed”. It is not the map that makes the place what it is but the place is made once we engage with it in following the map, in ignoring it etc.

In this broad theoretical section in general – which discusses Practice, Process and Performativity- we keep showing the difference between thinking in terms of representation and re-creation in many ways and from different standpoints. In the context of cartography, this disparity is made manifest very powerfully. Sullivan puts it eloquently:

“So on the one hand, mapping as totalized representation omnivorously swallows that which it presents; on the other hand, mapping as an exhaustive representation endlessly fragments, splintering off new mappings as it assumes an infinite variety of perspectives from which to situate its restless representations: by the setting of these labile parameters, we can gauge the expansively polymer domain of the possible in cartography’s performance” (ibid: p.86).

The ways maps are designed and drawn have the power to influence the places that they aim to depict and in a way potentially transform them. For instance the mapping of Africa has been debatable throughout the centuries with disjuncture between the cartography of imperialism in the eighteenth century and the cartography of colonialism in the nineteenth (Stone 1995: p.226). Cartography as a procedure serves more complex imperatives than the geographical depiction, as one might think. Lewis and Wigen (1997: p.36) inform us that:

“Viewing Europe and Asia as parts of a single continent would have been far more geographically accurate, but it would also have failed to grant Europe the priority that Europeans and their descendants overseas believed it deserved. By positing a continental division between Europe and Asia, Western scholars were able to reinforce the notion of a cultural dichotomy between these two areas - a dichotomy that was essential to modern Europe’s identity as a civilization”.

We thus witness the performative nature of continents' identities in a similar way that Butler talks about the construction of peoples' identities.

### **2.7.5 The performativity of reputation-making**

In bringing this section to a close, we explore how reputation-making might be analysed from a different perspective than the perspectives conventionally used in the reputation literature. In so doing we have to evoke once again the disparity between re-presentation and re-creation discussed above as it lies at the core of the notion of formative reputation whose development is central to the contribution of this study. Indeed, appreciating this disparity forms the backbone of the thesis on reputation-making and the accompanying alternative way of perceiving: "The becoming of social media: The role of rating, ranking and performativity in organizational reputation-making".

In the empirical review on reputation, it has become clear that one of the organizational priorities has been to make practical sense of what good and bad reputations mean. Therefore lists with rankings and comparisons among reputational standings have emerged. Business magazines such as Forbes, BusinessWeek, and Smart Money rank mutual funds on the basis of their performance in financial markets as a resource that helps in reducing uncertainty for prospective investors. The Financial Times newspaper publishes one of the most influential ranking schemes for Business Schools and U.S. News & World Report compiles a list of "Top Graduate Schools" (Espeland and Sauder 2007). Fortune "Most admired companies" lists are a further striking example of these mechanisms in which annual aggregate reputational scores are produced as averages of eight dimensions: management quality; product quality; innovativeness; value as a long-term investment; financial soundness; ability to attract; develop and retain personnel; community and environmental responsibility; and use of corporate assets (see Love and Kraatz 2009). In the hospitality sector, the Michelin Red Guide is one of the oldest and most influential accreditation schemes for restaurants (Rao et al. 2003). Such reputation contests are "social tests of products and organizations" (Rao 1994) that minimize uncertainty and establish organizational standing. Understanding these rankings, metrics and the algorithms that produce them is of particular importance

for organizations, as one would say it is increasingly becoming more important to *be* number one in the ranking rather than to *act* like number one in reality.

However this logic would resemble the Cartesian doctrine or in other words it would support the argument that ratings and rankings are depictions of reality and can therefore be correct, false, legitimate or not. The reader though who has followed this theoretical analysis, starting from the very distinctive way Process Theory views phenomena, along to the enactment of practices that re-creates them to the notion of performativity, which after all is a particular way of understanding Process Theory, must be finding difficult to perceive them as two separate states. Instead, the reader should be now familiar with the following aspect: The accomplishment of a practice happens every time anew, and as Process Theorists would add, it cannot happen twice, as it will inevitably be a different practice.

Hence “having” the reputation of being number one and being number one are not perceived here as different states, which in a sense contradicts a fundamental presupposition evident in the majority of the literature on reputation. Exception is the work of scholars like Espeland and Sauder (2007) who in discussing reputation metrics appreciate their performativity: “reputational metrics and rankings are ‘reactive’ or performative by generating self-reinforcing behaviours and shifting cognitive frames and values over time”. Furthermore, Power et al. (2009) although they ontologically separate between what reputation *is* and what we understand of it, they acknowledge the generativity of rankings: “they may or may not be true, but they are social facts which generate actions and reactions” and in the end it is their performative character that counts. This has been also noted by Lange et al. (2011) who emphasize how rankings reinforce reputations:

“For example, since Fortune’s “America’s Most Admired Companies” is known and respected by the general public and is used by other information intermediaries such as media representatives to assess firm reputation, it certainly helps to influence the collective perceptual representation of the organizations that are described and ranked by Fortune. It therefore both reflects and helps in the social construction of firm reputation”.

Even though researchers draw on the performativity of reputation metrics, they align themselves with the view that differentiates between what reputation actually *is* and what observers think it is, an ontological departure point we aim to question with the

use of Process Theory, Practice Theory and Performativity. The meeting point of these three theoretical streams allows us to analyze the process of reputation-making in the travel sector through a perspective that has not been approached in the literature before. Only if we actively engage with what these theoretical frameworks add to our practices of knowing, we will perceive reputation as reputation-making or to put it differently every practice of reputation-making will be treated as a different enactment.

The following chapter will lead us through the methodological choices, but prior to this, Table 3 summarizes the main notions of performativity.

	<b>Key concepts in the literature</b>	<b>Key researchers</b>	<b>Points to build upon</b>
Performativity	In saying what I do, I actually perform the action.	Austin 1975	Performativity in the context of UGC has implications (more intensive than via other media or WOM). We attempt to trace and analyze those implications.
	“The reiterative and citational practice through which discourse produces the effects that it names”.	Butler 1993	
	“Performative knowledge is legitimate not because it is true, but because it has a technical value associated with producing results”.	Lyotard 1984	
	“Economics, in the broad sense of the term, performs, shapes and formats the economy, rather than observing how it functions”.	Callon 1998	
	“In other words conversations in particular and human actions in general are enacted narratives”.	Czarniawska 1997	

**Table 3 Notions of performativity**

## Chapter 3 Research Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

“When we talk about methodology we are implicitly talking about our identity and the standards by which we wish our work to be judged”

(Hine 2005: p.8).

This chapter presents the methodological choices that have informed the thesis throughout each stage of this field intensive, longitudinal research (2007-2012). Consistent with the theoretical preoccupations presented in previous chapters, the tenets of process and performativity reappear from a methodological point of view. In this light, what follows is a technical narration of the research strategy and its stages as if it were a straightforward procedure. However, as previously explained, research is treated in a processual way rather than procedural. Methodological choices and how these have been realized are abstracted and discussed along with ethical considerations and criteria upon which this research aims to be judged and evaluated.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section presents the research strategy which comprises of a multilevel research design. The next section explains how data has been handled and introduces the reader to a preliminary analysis. Although usually the terminology of the methodological stages refers to an ontology that favours the discovery of phenomena, we would like to emphasize the performative role of the researcher who in a sense creates data and its analysis rather than gathers some preexisting forms that potentially are out there ready to be explained. The theoretical perspectives of process and performative urge a reconsideration of how methodological choices are made and reported and thus necessitate the use of a different vocabulary to communicate findings. With that in mind the final section considers principles of data collection (*or creation*), as well as criteria for interpreting the findings, focusing on the qualitative nature of the research undertaken. Before moving to the main sections, the nature of the multilevel research design is discussed.

## 3.2 Research Design

### 3.2.1 A multilevel research design: The complexities of combining case study and netnography strategies

The core of this section is to orientate the reader across the paths that the researcher followed *or created*. In light of this goal we will look at the case study in TripAdvisor which lasted from March 2008 (started in London) until June 2009 (finished in Boston) and at how netnography has been employed (the main phase lasted from March 2009 until June 2010) along with the reasons behind choosing the units of analysis and the particular methods each time. The section documents the specificities of how data has been collected and then analyzed with the use of thematic analysis and the support of Evernote and Inspiration software packages.

As de Vaus (2001: p.9) notes “the function of a research design is to ensure that the evidence obtained enables us to answer the initial question as unambiguously as possible”. When it comes to research, “unambiguously” varies and as stated in the previous chapters the active involvement of the researcher moves beyond reports into recreations. What is meant is that the procedure of doing research and putting it into words is not neutral, yet it performatively recreates the phenomena under analysis. Morgan (1983: p.389) explains this performative recreation by saying that “all social phenomena may have many potential ways of revealing themselves and the way they are realized in practice depends on the mode of engagement adopted by the researcher”.

The aim of the research has been to understand how the organization of UGC into forms of rankings and ratings has shaken the well-established principles of reputation-making practices. To address this research aim multiple stakeholders and groups of interest have been involved. The phenomenon of reputation-making necessarily involves hoteliers and hospitality managers, yet brings UGC creators (users- travellers) and administrators (UGC website’s founders and managers) to the forefront. Indeed, it has been challenging to incorporate distributed interest groups under a label called *fieldwork*.

Therefore a multi-level strategy has been employed in order to construct a systematic corpus of data. Against this backdrop, the research strategy comprises of a case study

at the offices of the largest travel user-generated website operator and an adaptation of virtual ethnography, called netnography. Netnography has not been considered as a supplementary data collection method, but rather a distinct research strategy. Bearing in mind that “research problems, research design, data collection methods, and analytic approaches should all be part of an overall methodological approach and should all imply one another” (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: p.11), the following sections present the co-constitutive parts of the research strategy, how these have been selected, organized and analyzed into themes as arrested moments of practice.

Prior to the presentation of the research strategy a preliminary phase has to be noted, as it has played an important role in the development of the methodology. In March 2008 the researcher travelled to San Francisco to attend a practitioners’ conference on “Social Media Strategies for Travel, User-Generated-Content and Social Networking in Travel”, organized by EyeForTravel. As this has been an international highly-esteemed conference, hospitality leaders and executive managers from all over the world presented and attended it, including TripAdvisor (which was the company the researcher was aiming to conduct the case study at and was already having difficulties in getting access to). In order to attend this conference, there were some practical impediments I had to overcome: acquiring the travel Visa on time and negotiating reasonable access to a conference with attendance fee \$2500. Being persistent in calling the American Embassy literally every hour guaranteed me a timely Visa appointment. As for the negotiations, I managed to attend it at no cost, provided that I would prepare an executive summary with the minutes of the two-day conference for the organizing company.

The benefits of attending the conference were threefold. First, I gained an informed idea of the key issues that travel professionals were preoccupied with at an early stage. Also, I had the opportunity to approach executive managers of TripAdvisor who later helped me to contact the right people at TripAdvisor in London. Finally, this served as the preliminary study, whereby key people in the industry have been interviewed. Their selection has been systematic and facilitated by the online networking platform, through which I contacted speakers and attendees and managed to book interview slots before leaving London. Two hotel reputation managers (from Hilton and Starwood), one travel media representative (from Jupiter Research), the CEO and founder of the first travel community (Flyertalk) have been interviewed

(see Table 4). The set of questions used during this phase served as a pilot which then has been modified for the case study and netnography.

### Preliminary interviews

Participants	Company	Data collection methods	Specificities
Founder & CEO	<b>Flyertalk</b>	Face to face	50' in San Francisco
	First travel community	Interview	
Director of Sheraton Interactive Marketing	<b>Starwood Hotels &amp; Resorts Worldwide</b>	Face to face	45' in San Francisco
Vice President of Brand Marketing	<b>Hilton Hotels</b>	Face to face	51' in San Francisco
Travel Analyst	<b>Jupiter Research</b>	Interview	55' in San Francisco
		Face to face	
		Interview	

Table 4 Preliminary Interviews

### 3.2.2 Case study as the first constitutive part of the Research Design

As with any research design, in order to address the research questions, the choice rests on what is to be studied (Holliday 2007: p.17). However, from a Process perspective what *is* to be studied *becomes* constantly and what remains to be analyzed is an abstraction from the flow. The case study in particular is presented as an instance abstracted from “a larger set of parallel instances” (Orum et al. 1991: p.2) and as Yin (2003: p.13) maintains it 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”. Being aware that “the phenomenon always escapes”, the first research strategy employed to study UGC was a case study aiming to allow the researcher to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (ibid: p.2).

More specifically, TripAdvisor has served as the user-generated content website under study. TripAdvisor as a unit of analysis with multiple identities embraces

many interest groups: millions of users-travellers that create content online, administrators of this content who are based in offices worldwide and hoteliers whose properties are reviewed and they can choose the degree of participation (more details about how TA functions will be presented in the next chapter). Thus, uncovering the dynamics in this context poses distinctive challenges compared to a well-defined, physical community or organization. The following Table (5) briefly summarizes the case study, details of which are presented in the following paragraphs.

### Case Study (brief presentation)

Characteristics	Unit of Analysis	Data collection methods	Specificities
Single Descriptive with explanatory & exploratory nature	TripAdvisor	Interviews (Phase A)	Location: TA London Dates: (7/2008-2/2009) Number of participants: 6 <b>(Managing Director, Director of Communications European Community Dir. Sales Dir., Spanish Community Manager Marketing Director)</b> Nature: Semi- structured Duration: 45- 55 min
	Group Discussion		Location: TA London Date: 4/12/2009 Number of participants: 4 <b>European Community Dir. Community Specialists (Germany, Italy, France)</b> Duration: 1h 31min
		Interviews (Phase B)	Location: TA Boston Dates: 6/2009 Number: 4 <b>(CEO, VP of Partnerships, VP of site experience, Trade Relations Manager)</b> Nature: Semi- structured Duration: 44- 48 min

Documents	Examples of inappropriate content Presentations & diagrams Folder with all publications, press releases about TA
Participant observation	Location: TA Boston Dates: 6/2009

**Table 5 Case study specificities**

### **3.2.2.1 Exploring an explanatory case study or explaining an exploratory one**

For the reasons described above, it has been hard to follow Yin's categories and neatly label the fieldwork strategy as a single or a multiple case study with either a descriptive or explanatory nature. Strictly considering the unit of analysis, a single organization has been selected, with multiple identities and interest groups. Thus from this perspective, it is a descriptive case study with explanatory and exploratory dimensions. As de Vaus (2001: p.221) suggests, "a well-designed case study will avoid examining just some of the constituent elements. It will build up a picture of the case by taking into account information gained from many levels". In other words, the goal in this aspect of the research strategy is to freeze different arrestations of the practice of reputation-making. At this point, we have to repeat the situated nature of the study, we are part of a phenomenon that is created rather than discovered.

### **3.2.2.2 Groups of people, community, online organization or ...?**

In this study, we selected the largest online travel website as a unit of analysis, TripAdvisor. TripAdvisor's story will be presented and discussed in the empirical section; here the focus is the logic behind its selection, and a few basic characteristics. Sjoberg et al. (1991: p.36) maintain that the unit of analysis of the case study can potentially be an individual, a community, an organization, a nation-state, an empire, or a civilization. TripAdvisor embraces multiple identities and becomes what it is through this multiplicity. It is a community of travellers which is managed and governed by a profitable organization. Its selection was based on the premise that it can be considered the largest UGC website in travel and thus its growth makes it commonly acknowledged and recognized.

However gaining access proved a difficult part of the research. TripAdvisor did not have a track record of working with university researchers and rebuffed early attempts at contact. This raised the question: Should the researcher compromise the logic of the research design and possibly also rigour and relevance for the sake of easiness by selecting a more approachable community? Should the entire research project be reconsidered? The researcher decided that irrespective of the difficulties, it would be preferable for the sake of richness to conduct the case at TA.

### **3.2.2.3 Data creation- the becoming of data**

The case study in TripAdvisor – in this case we refer to TA as an organization that manages UGC - has been conducted mainly through interviews. The interviews took place in two phases throughout a year. The first phase consists of six semi-structured interviews and a group discussion with four participants in Headquarters of TripAdvisor in London, while the second phase includes four semi-structured interviews in Headquarters of TripAdvisor in Boston. In total fourteen top-managers holding key positions or leading/directing departments have been interviewed covering most possible sources in the organization, such as Communications department, Management, Sales, Community and Forum, Partnerships, Site Experience and Usability, Trade Relations and the founder and CEO of the company. The only section that has been left out of the study was the IT department, which is not permitted to give any public interviews. In general, the multiple identities of TA have been explored through a gamut of executive interviewees and perspectives.

All interviews lasted between 44 minutes and 1 ½ hour, some of which took place in the relaxing lounge café – unfortunately close enough to the espresso machine - while others took place in the nicely designed conference rooms or in the offices. All followed a semi-structured format and have been recorded and transcribed. They have been formal enough to lead towards specific discussion topics but at the same time open enough to leave space for new topics to emerge spontaneously beyond the researcher's expectations and presuppositions. The researcher followed a questions list prepared beforehand, yet the discussions were open and new themes emerged (see table 6 with the main set of questions). After every interview, diary notes were written up in an effort to convey a sense of people, places and arrangements in an ethnographic way. These notes provided the necessary context during the

transcription and analysis of the interviews. The emotional reactions of informants to the subjects under discussion are important to take into consideration by the researcher (Whyte 1982: p.114).

### Main List of Questions (Case Study)

1. How far is TA offering based upon a business model and how far is it an expression of yourself? (**Only addressed to founder and CEO**)
2. Could you describe the responsibilities that you have as .... in the largest travel virtual community?
3. Could you describe the daily routine and everyday management issues of a UGC manager?
4. What issues do you feel user-generated content sites –in general and in the travel sector- most effectively tackle?
5. Get the truth, then go! What was the story of the motto? What does it mean to you? (How does it change from time to time?)
6. How are vendors adapting to the UGC phenomenon? Who is setting the standards for UGC use and who is being left behind? (**Only addressed to VP of partnerships**)
7. How differently do big hotel chains, B&Bs, hostels, restaurants respond to the phenomenon? (**Only addressed to VP of partnerships**)
8. How would you describe TA? A virtual travel community, a virtual place to gather information...?
9. To what extent is TA different from any other virtual travel space –or if you want competitor-? What is really distinctive?
10. According to your opinion, what were the events or developments that led to the first User-generated content website?
11. Do you refer to participants on Trip Advisor as users, consumers, travellers or stakeholders?
12. Who decides about organizational or algorithmic changes and on what grounds?
13. I would be interested in your views on the advantages and disadvantages of public openness with regard to TA algorithm.
14. Does TA treat each case of “content check” individually or every case falls within the netiquettes and rules posted on the website?
15. How standardized is the “research” related to fraudulent behaviour?
16. Have users changed over the years?
17. What is more important to you; the possession of knowledge or the process of acquiring it?

Table 6 List of questions for the case study

In addition to the interviews, documents provided by TripAdvisor staff served as further frozen moments of studying reputation-making. Documents were examples of inappropriate content that was not online any more, thus otherwise inaccessible as well as an electronic copy of all press releases and publications about TripAdvisor (including scanned copies). The researcher has been also given diagrams and presentation slides from internal presentations, along with copies of presentations delivered by TripAdvisor employees at conferences. Also, a kind of participant

observation –very limited and short – could be reported among the methods employed, whilst being in Boston in June 2009 for the second phase of the interviews, I was given my own little office (see Figure 2) and had the opportunity to walk around for four days and have conversations with employees. I afforded to observe them playing games during their breaks, having lunch as if they were in a summer camp and discussing their ideas while holding a glass of wine after work. All offices I visited during fieldwork (in London Covent Garden, London Soho Square and Boston) were modern, friendly and smartly designed. Mainly young and ambitious people were demonstrating how enthusiastic they were about their jobs. While wandering around the cozy offices in the small corporate building in Newton, a suburb of Massachusetts, I could not overlook the sign on the CEO's door “Speed Wins!”. I also attended a workshop on usability with professionals from many sectors that TripAdvisor hosted one of the days I was there (6/9). In total the researcher attended six <sup>4</sup>conferences in London, Boston, San Francisco, where she could stay up-to-date with regard to the travel and technology issues the sector was preoccupied with, as well as discover further potential ways of studying reputation-making in coffee breaks.



**Figure 2 The welcome message on the whiteboard in the office I was given at TA Boston (author's personal archive)**

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<sup>4</sup> 16-17/01/2008 EyeForTravel Distribution Technology 2008 conference, Regents Park Marriott, London

5-6/3/2008 Social Media Strategies for Travel, User-Generated- Content and Social Networking in Travel, Hotel 480, San Francisco

World Travel Market Exhibition 2009, 2010, 2011 along with the events and presentations organized on “Technology and Online Travel”.

As Myers and Newman (2007) remark, interviews are usually reported as problematic methods because of “artificiality, lack of trust, lack of time, elite bias, Hawthorne effects and ambiguity of language”. Although it is generally difficult to avoid these restrictions, the nature and flow of the interviews was structured in a way that the researcher’s goal did not overwhelm the respondents and the introductory clarifications were limited to basic issues of confidentiality. The lack of time was admittedly an issue, as informants’ schedules were very busy; e-mail follow-ups clarified any unclear areas though. The CEO, asked for the questions in advance so that he would know the content and he would have the control over the level of confidential information revealed. Although this parameter possibly changed the balance or biased the answers it was a necessary evil. The e-mail communication with respondents continued after the completion of the interviews. For instance when TripAdvisor’s logo changed on 28/4/09, I contacted the communications manager and asked him why they decided to replace their logo (“Get the truth, then go!”).

Only one co-constitutive part of the research design has been presented so far. In the following section, netnography as a different yet interrelated research strategy will be discussed.

### **3.2.3 Netnography as a different co-constitutive part of the Research Design**

When the field is distributed across space and time, immersion in the field is defined differently. TripAdvisor apart from being a profitable organization, has been a user-generated website. In what follows, we sketch out adaptations of virtual ethnography, and how they have been employed towards studying this different aspect of TripAdvisor.

In order to understand virtual ethnography and its adaptation, netnography, it is necessary to first give a short account of conventional ethnography and its principles. Ethnography has been associated with deep, longitudinal, anthropological research that produces thick descriptions of cultures and groups. The ways in which the ethnographers immerse themselves within the environment they study are unique to the ethnographic approach. As Wardle and Gay y Blasco (2007: p.5) note, the key analytic prisms through which ethnographers look at the world are “comparison, contextualization of a life world, and exposition of the relationships involved”. Wittel (2000) notes that the ethnographic practice is characterized by the researchers’

‘attendance’ and their ‘co-presence’: the ethnographer lives within the observed phenomenon as opposed to an external reporter. We have made clear that the theoretical backbone of this research rejects the dichotomy between external observers and immersed ones, as all researchers are part of the flow and consequently not external to a pre-specified entity artificially called “the phenomenon”. However, the discussion here emphasizes the degree of involvement that the ethnographer develops. Being an ethnographer is associated with being constantly reflecting upon observations, experiences and interactions in a confessional way, which allows the realization of how things come to be.

Most accounts of seminal ethnography are typical of their vividness and richness. Researchers go through a process of suffering or co-suffering, whereby they are left alone with the new environment and its inhabitants. Malinowski (1978: p.4) describes very vividly the scene where the ethnographer is left alone: “imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight”. Thus the elements of co-presence and co-suffering illustrate the degree of immersion of the researcher. Co-presence presupposes that the researcher is located where the participants are and both participants and ethnographer go through similar experiences or life dramas – they co-suffer -. A further common attribute is that they conduct longitudinal and *authentic* research. Hallett and Jeffers (2008) put it: “getting the seats of your pants dirty with real research”. In the next sub-section we will progress to present virtual ethnography and its adaptation, netnography, with details about why it has been employed in the study.

### **3.2.3.1 Virtual Ethnography and Netnography**

Moving to virtual ethnography, it is interesting to see how technology and the computer-mediated environment with all accompanying constraints and possibilities change the methodological approach. Ethnography conducted on the web does not emerge as a mere transition from conventional to online space. Escobar (1994) puts it: “The point of departure (cyber-ethnography) is the belief that any technology represents a cultural invention, in the sense that technologies bring forth a world; they emerge out of particular cultural conditions and in turn help to create new social and cultural situations”. It is beyond the scope of the section to conclude on the real

or imaginary character of online communities (such as computer games) and therefore their study but comparisons to conventional ethnography will be unavoidable to further illustrate the point. Fox and Roberts (1999) note that “the task of cyber-ethnography has more to do with exploring the ongoing-reflexive construction of social spaces and identities than with arguing whether virtual spaces possess particular attributes of ‘real’ communities”. Christine Hine, who originally introduced virtual ethnography, puts emphasis on the experiential nature of being online: “visiting the Internet focuses on experiential rather than physical displacement. As Burnett suggests you travel by looking, by reading, by imaging and imagining” (2000: p.45). Virtual ethnography or cyber ethnography is about studying online civilizations, interactions, and discourses and allows the researcher to understand the practices of the online space under study each time.

The possibilities opened up by employing virtual ethnography can be summarized in saying that we gain “a reflexive understanding of what it is to be a part of the Internet” (Hine 2000: p.10). Although the online ethnographer does not have to physically travel to an isolated or exotic site, “they still have to employ the fundamental principles of conventional ethnography such as to “case the scene”, to create a strategy for entering and getting access, engage the culture, slowly get to know people, create a strategy for watching and listening via text, create categories ...and analytic models” (Thomsen et al. 1998). By no means should we expect that virtual ethnography and its seeming convenience would free us of worries related to the reporting of insights (Fabian 2002). On the contrary, the systematisation and analysis of data collected (or in this context frozen moments created) through virtual ethnography demands discipline, imagination and full commitment to the research procedure.

Kozinets (2002) proposes an adaptation of virtual ethnography, netnography: “a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through CMCs”. Kozinets 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. Kozinets (ibid: pp.63-65) differentiates between studying online communities and studying communities online. This distinction has methodological implications as in the first case netnography could serve as a solid standalone approach, whereas in the second it would be advisable to be supplemented by other approaches so that the researcher would gain access to different dimensions of the phenomenon beyond the online sphere. In this light the study has adopted netnography to study one accomplishment of TripAdvisor, yet acknowledging some of its other instances and distributed groups of interest involved.

Table 7 summarizes the above discussion on the different variations of ethnography, namely conventional ethnography; virtual ethnography; and netnography and gives an account of how the researcher has planned the procedure and how in the end experienced it, issues that we will discuss in the following sections.

	Conventional Ethnography	Virtual Ethnography	Netnography	Netnography in the current study (as planned)	Netnography in the current study as lived in praxis
<b>Environment</b>	Physical with tangible borders	Computer- mediated		Computer- mediated	Computer- mediated entangled with the physical
<b>Aim</b>	To fully understand and immerse within the community	To deeply understand the cultural foundations of the online group	To identify and understand the needs and decisions' influences of consumer groups	To understand how TripAdvisor's members engage with the practice of travelling and how UGC fits in this practice	
<b>Immersion</b>	Physical	Experiential	Not necessary but some degree of active participation and interaction is assumed	Experiential	
<b>Studying by:</b>	Travelling, looking, touching, contacting	Looking, reading, imaging, imagining	Reading, interacting, comparing	Looking, reading, interacting, imagining	Becoming part, reading , interacting, establishing contacts
<b>Uniqueness</b>	Vividness, richness, thick	Medium shapes research implications in		Managed to view the phenomenon through participants' sets of eyes, which would be	

	descriptions	some ways		impossible with the adoption of any other approach in this context	
<b>Research setting</b>	Remote community, exotic civilization	Online civilizations, interactions and discourses	Online consumer groups, Distributed 'fields'	Online community of TripAdvisor	TripAdvisor community, social networking groups, fora, blogs, travel articles (where TA users could be found)
<b>Unit of Analysis</b>	Members of the community/ relationships built over time		Members of TripAdvisor community/ relationships	Members of TA who were members of social media in general/ relationships	
<b>Researcher</b>	Left alone in the community	Silent observer but also active member of the community (the degree of participation and involvement is open)	Active member of TripAdvisor community	Active member of travel web.2.0 spaces and UGC in general	
<b>Research Code</b>	Attendance, Co-presence, Co-suffering	Active participation and first hand sharing within online communities	Participative and observational approaches	Key prerequisite: how to work out ethical considerations	Developed strategies to enter and become a trustworthy member / Suffering online
<b>Recording</b>	Diary with notes	Files with emails, messages, forum threads		Atlas ti. Software package	Evernote (screenshots), emails
<b>Analysis</b>	Reflection upon observations, experiences, interactions obtained online	Reflection upon observations, experiences, interactions obtained online	Analysis of data directly copied but also inscribed through interactions	Reflection upon observations, experiences, interactions obtained online and sometimes extended in physical environments	
<b>Challenges</b>	Access, Acceptance, Trust, Adaptation Surviving	Access, engage the culture, get to know people, strategy for watching via text	Discipline, imagination, commitment  Public vs private sphere  Online consent  Anonymity	Access to the community, identification of threads of interest	Access to the community and the specific threads (Some closed only to hotel managers), Netiquettes, Exclusion, Trust and rapport Ethics

**Table 7 Different adaptations of ethnography**

### 3.2.3.2 Immersing in a netnographic setting

It is admittedly hard to identify the unit of analysis, possibly less straightforward than it would be if the unit were a Maori village or a small community in Trinidad.

As with most ethnographic studies, “boundaries are not assumed a priori but explored through the course of the ethnography” (Hine 2000: p.65). Having studied TripAdvisor through its founder, managers and administrators in the case study section, it is now netnography the research strategy through which we will get access to the other groups of interest that are part of TripAdvisor<sup>5</sup> and contribute content to it. The netnographic approach has been to some extent spontaneous, but also systematized following netnography’s principles and ethical codes. As Ward (1999) puts it: “Cyber ethnography allows a reflexive methodology to emerge, thus enabling the participants of virtual communities to define their own reality and perimeters”. Table 8 below documents a brief summary of netnography’s specificites.

**Netnography (lasted from 3/2009 until 7/2010 but follow-up interactions continued throughout the years)**

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	8	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/ Travellers	Destination experts on TA, thus active members Members of TA-related groups on FB	15 Online Interviews	19	TA PM platform Facebook and e-mail

<sup>5</sup> TA as constitutive of parts rather than constituted by them

Members of Helium community with an article published about TA.	Participant observation	9	E-mail Helium PM platform Helium published articles about TA
Travel Networks/ community members		4	PM within the networks and E-mail

**Table 8 Netnography specificities**

The respondents who have been contacted via netnography include hoteliers, hotel managers and hostel owners and users -either members of the TripAdvisor community or travellers and bloggers that have expressed a view about TripAdvisor online-. The reasons for selecting them were based on these online publications which were indicative of their engagement with TripAdvisor, either in the form of active involvement or in the form of articulated opinion about TA. More details about the selection follow later in the chapter.

The absence of a concrete research field has generated different types of concerns. Although Rutter and Smith (2005: p.84) maintain, “there is no obvious place to go to carry out fieldwork; doubtless Malinowski or Whyte would have been appalled by the ease with which the online version of their craft can be done”, conducting research online has its own challenges that need to be addressed. Paccagnella (1997) points out that a perspective informed by virtual ethnography opens up a world that has “its own dignity”.

If we draw a parallel with the case study research strategy, netnography is presented as an instance abstracted from a larger set of instances. In this study, netnography has been conducted in multiple ways: through direct interactions with the users of TripAdvisor community via the personal messaging system; through immersion in a number of online travel communities and interaction with travellers- users; through communication with hoteliers who either contribute to TripAdvisor community and respond to users’ comments or have somehow shown they are engaged with TripAdvisor. For example, in cases they have added a widget on their websites or a badge (see Figure 21 in the empirical section) or they have given online interviews claiming that their reputation has changed because of TripAdvisor. As Kozinets notes, “the combination of participative and observational approaches lies at the

centre of the ethnographic initiative" (2010: p.60). Online ethnographers are free to decide the degree of participation and observation they can afford. In the following section we will look more closely at the moments of netnography and the trials and tribulations the researcher encountered in practice.

### **3.2.3.3 Gathering data online or better put *creating* frozen moments of the reputation-making practices**

In this section we will closer look at the data collection methods employed as part of the netnographic research strategy. Physical fieldwork includes methods such as conducting interviews, observation, analysing of archives with photographic records, collecting community stories (Howard 2002) etc. Interesting enough is the degree of similarity to conventional fieldwork that the approach seems to bear. However, the computer-mediated environment creates a new methodological world and in a way reshapes traditional well-known methods.

Throughout the data collection (creation) period both synchronous and asynchronous interactions have been developed. The genuine immersion within the research setting is coined as co-suffering in conventional ethnography's terms. At this point we will document how the online equivalent of 'co-suffering' started on TripAdvisor website. The first active encounter with the TripAdvisor community started with the researcher creating a profile, adding a picture and her travel tastes (see figure 3). To gain an understanding of the travel practice and the role UGC has played, I then approached Destination Experts<sup>6</sup> on TripAdvisor community through the personal messages platform. The following message was sent:

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<sup>6</sup> Destination experts, as will be explained in the following chapter are passionate travellers- users who contribute a substantive amount of posts and in many cases they check TA messages more often than their e-mails.

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**Figure 3 Profile on TripAdvisor community (personal profile page)**

Hello \_\_\_\_\_!

My name is Vasiliki and I am a researcher at The London School of Economics in the Information Systems and Innovation Group. I have been looking at user-generated-content websites in the travel sector –such as TripAdvisor- and I am particularly interested in the dynamics of collective intelligence and reputation management.

I'd be really grateful if you would spare a little of your time to tell me about your experience using TripAdvisor. If you agree to help, I will email you a few questions. Your answers can be as long or short as you like. In anything I use from what you say, I will make sure that no clues are given to your identity. The purpose of the project is purely academic and the data will be used in the development of a case study for my PhD thesis.

I hope you will help and I am looking forward to receiving your answer!  
Best Wishes,  
Vasiliki

Users were excited and I started receiving warm messages such as the following ones, asking for details and the specific research question:

“Hi Vasiliki,

I would be happy to help with your research. Here in San Diego I find it quite interesting to talk with foreign students at our local university. Helping with your project will be interesting too. I would like to read a summary of your findings when you are finished with your work”,

“No problem. I am happy to help. I have advanced degrees in Business, Information Technology and Financial Services. I would love to see your work. I have edited textbooks and I could give you feedback on your work. Are you Greek? As I mentioned I am fascinated by the web and the power of forums on contemporary society”,

“Yes, by all means feel free to ask any questions. I check my PMs in TripAdvisor more than email, so you may get a quicker response there. If you're allowed to send out the results of the study out, I'd certainly be interested. Good luck!” (direct quotes from personal email exchanges).

Below (see Table 9) are presented most of the questions that have been asked at the first stage:

<b>List of Questions addressed to users (Netnography)</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tripadvisor's motto is "Get the truth, then go"! What does it mean to you?</li> <li>2. What does travel experience mean to you?</li> <li>3. How often do you travel and what are the main reasons?</li> <li>4. Do you follow specific steps each time to buy a holiday service/ package?</li> <li>5. Which are the information sources you would trust more?</li> <li>6. Why do you think user-generated content websites emerged in the travel sector?</li> <li>7. Have the influences shaping travel choices changed over the years?</li> <li>8. Do you feel that people nowadays are more skeptical and mistrustful towards marketing campaigns and advertisements or that was always the case?</li> <li>9. How is a travel community defined according to you? (borders, characteristics)</li> <li>10. What does make a virtual community distinctive?</li> <li>11. Why do you contribute to a travel community?</li> <li>12. What do you consider more important regarding users' participation? The possession of knowledge or the process of acquiring it?</li> </ol>	

**Table 9 List of Questions for Netnography**

Some respondents were happy to answer through TripAdvisor, others asked for my email and most were interested in knowing more about the project and myself. Few among them were initially reluctant but bothered to investigate my identity, primarily because of their bond with the community and the fact that they cared enough to prevent it from potential hazardous outsiders. In that sense I had to gain a different kind of access on the top of the informed consent from TripAdvisor to approach the members through their website. Installing a context of trust and establishing a rapport can be really painful since one has to prove something that under face-to-face circumstances would be taken for granted (Orgad 2005). There were four cases where I had to prove I am trustworthy or even that I was not a hacker. A user seemed confused with my surname, he replied me:

"I am just trying to confirm if you are asking people through Trip Advisor personal messages to answer questions in relation to your research thesis. Can you confirm you have done this and if so the relevance of your Screen name. Baka seems like a male name and the Profile on Trip Advisor is one of a female".

Another user asked for more information about myself and he was one of the most skeptical about my identity and the academic nature of the project. However, after a few clarifications, he has been convinced. Below is his message of final acceptance:

“I am happy to answer your questions. If you contact me through this email address I will try and answer your questions as best I can. I will also inform others you have contacted that you are a bono fide researcher. Some may not be willing to give out there home email and it might be best to ask questions through the PM system. I would also ask you to consider contact Trip Advisor administrators to make sure they have no objections to you using their website for your research”.

After I finished the first round of the case study in TripAdvisor in London, I asked for (and ensured) their informed consent before I approached the members. However, on the second day and after having approached around 100 users, I realized that my account was blocked (see figure 4). Not only was I unable to send further messages, but also had no access to my inbox and therefore to my *data*. Many of the users had already agreed to answer to my questions through TripAdvisor’s platform.

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**Figure 4 No access to inbox. Turn on button was disabled (personal profile page)**

At first I was confused whether the decision to block me was a bug, a technical problem or a conscious decision made by TripAdvisor team or algorithm. I immediately sent a message to TripAdvisor support, which at the time was a difficult task through a platform that favours automated answers and FAQs to any kind of personalized communication. Under these circumstances, the only “place” I could attract attention was a link to a form called “Is there anyone I can e-mail if I think a forum is getting out of hand?”.

It was my conscious choice not to mention and perhaps a mistake not to send the proof of informed consent from TripAdvisor in London. Eventually, I received the following answer:

Dear TripAdvisor Member,  
upon reviewing the contents we have noted that your messages do not comply with the following guidelines and have therefore been deleted:  
No Spam - Members should refrain from "spamming" other members.  
Mass communications are not permitted.  
Relevant to other travelers - Private messaging is intended for travel-

related discussions between members.

Per our guidelines, the definition of "spam" is not limited to advertising and marketing materials, and we state clearly in our forum guidelines that we do not allow users to conduct "surveys, polls and research for future publication (or your geography homework)".

Our complete guidelines can be found at

<http://www.TripAdvisor.com/pages/private.messaging.guidelines.html>

Thank you for your understanding in this matter.

Sincerely,

TripAdvisor Support Team

Almost panicked I kindly asked my contact person in London to investigate the issue but unfortunately the case was beyond his control. Although the discussion that I had started did not strictly fall within the category of a "survey", this is how it had been interpreted and I had to comply. I decided that it would be pointless to push the issue further and try to convince them to unblock my account, particularly since my contact person in London was trying to negotiate access to the headquarters in Boston for the second phase of the case study. There was not much I could do.

After some days I sent an email to the user who was the most difficult to convince (see above) and explained him the situation. He helped me in practice by posting a message on a forum only accessible to 'destination experts':

"It is a shame that TA have chosen to disable your messaging system but having been a member of TA for a number of years this is just the sort of thing they do. I have placed a message on the Destination Experts forum (You and any other non DE cannot get access to this forum) telling them that you are genuine and that I would pass on your email to them..."

A further problem I had to face was that in the introductory message I sent, I did not include my e-mail address. Therefore, people who might have been interested to contact me would be unable, and potentially they were many. A question that arises is how much anonymity can we as researchers afford to lose while asking for data. This was a trade-off I was confronted with when deciding how much of my personal data I would disclose in the introductory message. On the one hand I was the one who entered their online space and contacted them, on the other hand I was also exposed and would like to retain my privacy in the sense of control of my online identity. Intron and Pouloudi (1999) discuss this notion of privacy (among others) and bring together definitions by Fried (1968), Westin (1968) and Parker (1974) to

illustrate the aspect of privacy referring to “control over knowledge about oneself”. In other words even though I revealed my full name, as I should to establish trust and rapport, I remained sceptical about giving out my academic e-mail. Retrospectively, this was both an illusion of determining the extent to which others had access to my personal data and a practical hindrance, as potential respondents would not be able to approach me when I was blocked on TA.

In total, I managed to save fifteen interviews, while TA deleted many from my inbox when the account was blocked. The interviews conducted were mainly e-mail based and comprised of approximately three emails per respondent. The method is highly used among the virtual ethnographers with all its advantages and disadvantages. As Hewson and Laurent (2008: p.67) report “online interviews have probably been most common, through ethnographic studies drawing upon interview, observation, and document analysis techniques” (see also Clark et al. 2004).

The online interview has been considered as a snapshot, one moment of the relationship with the respondents. Prior to selecting them and after the interviews I have been observing their quality and quantity of reviews, their replies to forum posts, the immediacy and their writing style. 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 my case it has not been limited to TripAdvisor members. However, the researcher is ethically committed to reveal their identity and purpose of participation. Hence in my introductory message I clearly mentioned who I am and what I do.

To come back to the methodological adventure, the route that my netnography was taking seemed very disappointing. I was struggling amongst different alternatives when I realized that I was not fully using the potential of web 2.0 and social media. TripAdvisor members were citizens of a broader online world with multiple identities and TripAdvisor was only one of the “places” they liked to gather. What I had to do was to find alternative ways to get in touch with the same people but through different channels. Social Networking sites, such as Facebook and a

community called “Travel 2.0 - The Travel and Hospitality Social Network” were two viable alternatives. Groups called “Addicted to TripAdvisor” or “TripAdvisor fans” were the first Facebook groups I joined, from which nineteen respondents have answered to the questions mainly through Facebook messages and e-mails. Within such Facebook groups and others called “disappointed by TA”, “TA guests from hell” etc., I also observed discussions and threads, along with topics of importance such as manipulation and trustworthiness. These alternative channels enabled me to further observe and engage with discourses about TA. 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 a review site. Nine opinionated people have been interviewed on those sites; while I also used their articles published online (mainly as a starting point for the interviews). For instance, the nine people or as Helium community calls them “authors” had produced texts about TA based on which I selected them and slightly modified my questions around. Carter (2005) asked her participants to write short stories or monologues about their personal relationships in Cybercity. In my case those “monologues” were already there in the form of published opinions about TripAdvisor and I had to make sense of them (see Figure 5 below).

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**Figure 5 Helium.com interface (a user’s post about his experience of TripAdvisor)**

Part of the virtual immersion was a close observation of a number of travel related sites, or social media sites and blogs. RSS<sup>7</sup> and Google alerts were two tools used to keep up-to-date and well-informed on online discussions related to TripAdvisor and the surrounding issues, as well as a method to pinpoint another group of interest: hoteliers. The close observation of references to TripAdvisor online afforded me to identify hoteliers and hostel owners, actively engaged with the phenomenon of TA

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<sup>7</sup> Really Simple Syndication

and travel writers and bloggers who were analyzing the dynamics of TA from their perspectives. In Kozinets' (2002) description of netnography, he presents a similar account of how a corpus of data was created by putting together: "the data the researchers directly copy from the CMCs of online community members and the data the researchers inscribe regarding their observations of the community and its members, interactions and meanings".

Based on these observations, I interviewed eight hoteliers and five hostel owners, who actively engage with TripAdvisor (see Table 8). They either make use of the management response functionality on TA, or they participate in the fora or they have mentioned TripAdvisor in online interviews referring to changes in their reputation and the booking rates since the emergence of TripAdvisor. For instance this was the case for a hotel in Scotland; the hotel manager reported a rise of 8% in UK leisure business for the first quarter of 2009 and highlighted the role of TripAdvisor:

"We have devoted time and resources into Internet marketing and...we actively encourage guests to review the hotel on customer review websites. An example of this is the positive reviews on TripAdvisor resulting in The \*\*\* being ranked 10th out of 142 Edinburgh hotels listed on TripAdvisor. There is no doubt this kind of exposure pays off"<sup>8</sup>.

I then approached the hotel manager who gave this interview and arranged a Skype interview in which I followed the semi- structured format taking into account his online statements.

Most of the interviews took place synchronously on Skype after an exchange of e-mails introductions and arrangements (see table 8). Methodologically, Skype has been reported as a recognized means to conduct interviews, O'Connor et al. (2008: p.286) for instance note that "Skype allows face to face interviews to take place in a computer mediated environment", while Axelsson et al. (2003) broadly refer to the methodological use of real time chat: synchronous CMC has some "unique characteristics such as the use of iconic signs, and other means of expressing emotions and non- verbal communication."

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<sup>8</sup><http://express-press-release.net/60/Edinburgh%20hotel%20reports%20increase%20in%20UK%20business.php>

All platforms I used to approach respondents have broadly served as the *field* of what a Cartesian approach would call “online data collection” and what we call “the creation of frozen moments of practice”: On TA website, Facebook, Helium etc. the personal messaging platforms have been used. In the case of hostels, I joined specialized communities and fora (such as [hostelworld.com](http://hostelworld.com)) and in some cases I posed questions to groups or commented to threads related to TripAdvisor (see figure 6). This kind of participation was not against ethical codes, as I did not use these messages and interactions in the study. Participation helped me engage with the community and improve my understanding but the data I clearly used was on the basis I was given informed consent by the participants. As Whitley (2009) emphasizes, “consent to the processing of personal data is probably the most important mechanism that currently exists for determining how and when this data can be used”. This raises several issues. First, how public, publicly available discourses are? Is online data publicly available irrespective of the purpose and use? Shall the researcher reveal their research identity once entering the online space?

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**Figure 6 Participation of the researcher in a hostel’s forum**

As Fox and Roberts (1999) emphasize “a distinction may be made between that which is publicly available and that which is publicly disseminated”. There is a difference between the talk that takes place in public and the unjustified conclusion that the talk is public (Rutter and Smith 2005: p.89). To some extent, Kozinets (2002) touches upon the issue of ethics in netnography. He notes that the researcher

has to “fully disclose the presence, ensure confidentiality and anonymity, seek and incorporate feedback from members, take a cautious position on the private versus public medium issue”. Carter (2005) notes that ethnography conducted online bears similarities with conventional: “ethically cyber ethnography is similar to conventional ethnography because the four main moral obligations of dealing with human subject research are the same. The principle of non maleficence, the protection of anonymity, the confidentiality of data, and the obtaining of informed consent”. Rutter and Smith (2005) further highlight that online and offline worlds are ethically entangled, the interactions might be virtual but “the ramifications of unethical disclosure are real and inescapable”.

Moving from theory into practice, one concern was whether it was sufficient to respect those four “moral obligations”? What does informed consent mean in a virtual community and given by whom? Are all communities to be treated in the same ways or does the degree of sensitivity change the priorities (for instance is it the same to study a health community where people share life issues and a travel community where people share fun, see Baka and Scott (2008))? Researchers have addressed this distinction and have noted that non-sensitive and highly-sensitive topics require different treatment and impose diverse ethical complexities (Buchanan et al. 2011: p.92). Methodological codes of ethics have been revised since the Nuremberg Code was released in 1947 to address the research ethics 2.0 (ibid: p.102) that the sophistication of CMC demands (see also Eynon et al. 2008). Introna (2002) discusses the role of codes and imperatives in the context of hyperreality that technology mediated environments create and he questions the efficacy of being aware of obligation as opposed to experiencing it: “Obligation needs a face and a proper name. We must experience it not merely know it”. The debate is still on-going with many grey areas and dilemmas that we should further consider as netnography matures.

This section concludes by considering Flick’s (2006: p.52) encouragement: “thinking about ethical dilemmas should not prevent you from doing your research, but should help you do it in a more reflexive way and to take your participants’ perspective on a different level”.

### **3.2.3.4 Reflections and implications of employing Netnography as a research strategy**

In this brief section I would like to reflect on the experience of conducting netnography before we move to the next sections. This section is a response to the stream that *a priori* undermines the methodological richness and the analytical depth online research can produce. We should not assume that the mediated conduction of research is a compromise to *real*, face-to-face methods. Indeed, the mediated relationships with research respondents inform the methodological process in interesting ways. In the case of the travellers I interviewed on Facebook, there were times that I could not distinguish their multiple identities, to many of which I had access. The same people were research respondents, parents who uploaded pictures with their families on Facebook and humans with social life.

It was, indeed, difficult sometimes to separate the respondent giving me an interview from his identity as a father proudly sharing his family pictures on Facebook. Although this is one of the ethical challenges associated specifically with netnography among the collectives characterizing social media locales rather than other bounded (therefore by comparison relatively closed) electronic interest group communities, it is one faced by everyone who interacts or follows social media which blurs the boundaries between professional and personal life. I therefore gained access to their lives in ways that I would not if I had interviewed them face-to-face. Similarly I had to define the boundaries of the information I disclosed and shared with them about my life. Kivits (2005: p.38) refers to the grey line by confessing that in some cases he had to decide to what extent he could engage in the email relationship at a personal level: “In other cases, I had to find ways to escape a too strict interview context and create a comfortable interview situation favouring free speech”. These choices were not detached from the research itself. In face-to-face interviews the ice-breaking phase before entering into the specificities of the discussion is regarded important. This ice-breaking happens through different codes and patterns of communication online.

With some respondents we continued communicating after the online interviews. One participant and TripAdvisor destination expert asked for my advice and suggestions about a cruise in the Greek islands and shared with me her future plans

as if I were a friend of her. Another respondent invited me to Miami, while with many we exchanged several informal messages. Compared to the follow-up emails I exchanged with my face-to-face respondents that were limited to thank you and seasonal wishes, these were rather different. This should not imply that online or virtual methods are richer than face-to-face, but nor necessarily poorer.

As we noted in the case study section, netnography as a research strategy has been part of the phenomenon creation process and not simply the lens to study it. The concept of performativity has profound methodological implications attached as phenomena are modified by the act of selecting them, observing (Paccagnella 1997) and reporting them. This section concludes with a confessional account. Kozinets referring to his research in the coffee online community admits that his netnography has transformed the way he consumes coffee. The current study has changed the way travel as a practice is enacted, in ways that the researcher would not be able to imagine prior to the beginning of the study.

### **3.3 Data handling (or *moments* handling) and preliminary analysis**

As has become clear, the corpus of data -or better put moments- has been diverse comprising of interviews from different interest groups, documents, slides, spreadsheets or publicly available online documents, conference minutes and presentations, media coverage and in general publicly available material on the Internet (such as blog entries, interviews with key people etc.). 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. (Audio files have been converted into mp3 files using another software called Switch). “Moments” have then been systematized and imported into Evernote, a software programme that has proven particularly helpful both with regard to the organization of web data as well as the systematization of the corpus. Evernote served as a ‘camera’ where snapshots of webpages could be captured and stored onto a user- friendly database (see Figure 7). This practically afforded methodological abstractions for the purpose of analysis. The impermanence of Web

2.0 and social media – created further methodological complication, for instance web sources disappeared without trace, rankings and reviews were constantly being refreshed and the TripAdvisor webpage has changed 5 logos throughout the study. Against this backdrop, Evernote helped in freezing webpages and in keeping track of them. In total 1849 notes (either webpages or files) have been imported and tagged into the database: not only webpages of interest but also all interviews and documents. The interviews conducted as part of the case study and through netnography have been separated into six notes: hostel interviews, travellers' interviews, bloggers/ journalists/ travel experts interviews, hoteliers' interviews, other travel communities interviews and TripAdvisor team interviews.

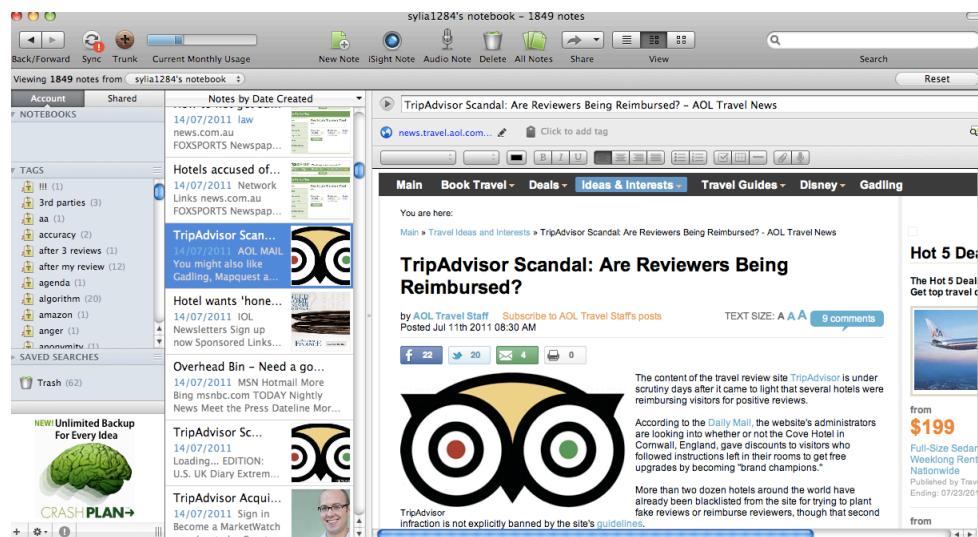


Figure 7 Evernote Interface (personal account)

The tagging of each note was an initial step of coding followed by a preliminary open coding procedure. Open coding followed the stages of conceptualization and abstraction, classification into concepts, primary interpretation, and organization into patterns or families of categories. This was not a neat and clear-cut procedure as presented here, but rather a journey of problematization that initially was data driven and half way through has been theorized using the principles of Process Theory. The coding has been conducted in the Evernote programme. Without conducting a formal content analysis the occurrence of themes has been manually counted and inserted into an Excel spread sheet. The only reason frequency of concepts has been reported was to identify the main themes based on participants' viewpoints.

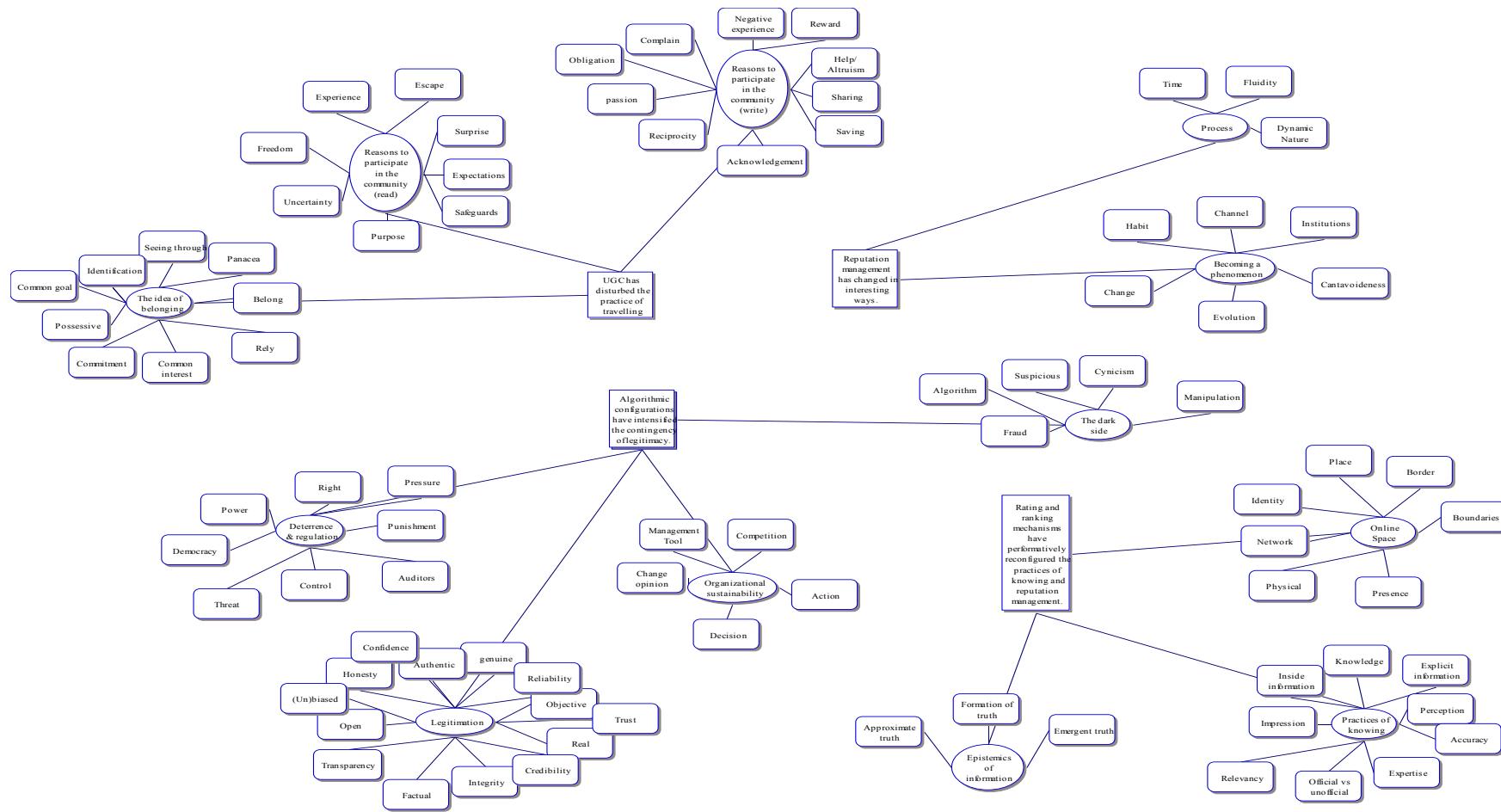
Excel has been used in the qualitative methodology literature as a data analysis tool.

Meyer and Avery (2009) discuss how Excel helps in organizing and analysing data. However we have used it exclusively to organize the frozen moments encountered in meaningful ways without employing logical functions to draw any kind of conclusions. After this first stage of coding, a more systematic thematic analysis followed. Following Attride-Stirling's (2001) coding techniques on how to build thematic networks, we produced 4 thematic networks (see Figure 8) with the use of Inspiration software (see also Arsal et al. 2010 in the context of online travel communities). Although we did not draw on Toulmin's argumentation theory that thematic networks root in, we employed the organizing concepts. The structure of a thematic network starts with basic themes (similar to the concepts of the open coding phase), moves to organizing themes (resembling the categories of open coding) and finally is organized into global themes. Basic themes are the lowest order ideas that emerge from the data. Organizing themes are "clusters of signification" (ibid) and global themes are claims that open up the analysis.

Thematic networks have served the purpose of technically depicting the research procedure to systematize the analysis. However we have to note once again the difference between procedural research accomplished in well-defined steps and processual research that emerges naturally through temporary abstractions. The four themes identified here that are going to be analysed in the subsequent chapters are:

1. UGC has disturbed the practice of travelling
2. Reputation-making has changed in interesting ways
3. Algorithmic configurations have intensified the contingency of legitimating
4. Rating and ranking mechanisms have reconfigured the practice of knowing and reputation management

The final section discusses the criteria and principles of the research journey before entering into the empirical chapter.



### 3.4 Criteria and Principles of moments' creation and interpretation

The standards for assessing the research must rely on criteria reported by the researcher and be identifiable by the readers. This final section summarizes the criteria and principles for assessing this piece of research.

With regard to the case study, Yin emphasizes the need to keep an up-to-date case study database which should allow independent inspections of the reader of the raw data irrespective of the accounts of the researcher. As already explained, Evernote was the programme used to keep track of all kinds of material: interviews, scanned documents and netnographic material, mainly as snapshots of websites, pictures and chats. In the same vein, external observers should be able to trace back and forth the logic of the research conduction. Therefore, it is advisable to maintain a chain of *evidence* along with the database allowing the reader to enjoy “methodological versatility”. As stated, we would rather transform it into “chain of moments”.

Gaskell and Bauer (2000) propose six criteria equivalent to quantitative ones. Triangulation and reflexivity refer to the maturity stages that the researcher experiences throughout the research procedure which lead to the development of a different persona as a result of inconsistencies, dilemmas and reflection. Transparency and procedural clarity entail “good documentation, transparency and clarity of procedures of data elicitation” as an equivalent to internal and external validity in quantitative research. Corpus construction is introduced as “the maximization of the variety of unknown representations”. It is thus a systematic procedure of involving different respondents until saturation has been reached. Thick description refers to the depth of the analysis. Surprise implies the novelty of the data either in terms of conceptual expectations or with regard to theoretical innovation. Communicative validation refers to the unconscious, to the level that goes beyond actors’ ability to realize the degree of embeddedness within the environment, its routines and practices. The researcher can see things that the respondents cannot see about themselves or cannot realise, as they take them for granted or of little importance.

Specific criteria also apply to netnography as a separate research strategy. Kozinets (2010: p.162) suggests ten criteria during netnography and its analysis. Coherence is

the extent to which reader's interpretations overcome disputes and contradictions. Rigour refers to the netnographic protocol of conducting fieldwork, not as a procedural checklist but mostly as the demonstration of deep understanding of the methodological choice. Literacy refers to the extent that the netnographer is aware of the body of knowledge and the relevant literature. Groundedness is the degree to which there is sufficient explanation on how theory is interlinked with data and in general how the one supports the other and justifies each other's existence. Resonance refers to the acknowledgement of the cultural and emotional aspects of the participants under study as well as the researcher's. Verisimilitude ensures the necessary explanations for readers to portray arguments through their own sets of eyes. Reflexivity covers the acknowledgement of the multiple interpretations that the researcher has chosen to not talk about. Praxis relates the netnographic account with social action leading to powerful changes and contribution to common good and intermix refers to the linkage between different modes of social interaction offline and online. In the discussion above we discussed how we hope to have respected these principles.

Finally, we would like to consider generalization and whether it could or should be claimed in a study whose corpus of moments builds on a single –yet multi-dimensional- case study and a netnographic approach. Seddon and Scheepers (2012) propose that it is hard to affirm the generalizing truthfulness of knowledge claims from a single case study. The question here would not be the generalizability or the thorough description of the “boundary conditions” but rather the research priority and the epistemological stance. In an earlier chapter we talked about the epistemics of information, a concept that reappears here from a methodological point of view. We do not claim any kind of *truth* that needs to be evaluated in the broader context and possibly generalized in other contexts, but rather we concretize how arrested moments of abstractions created data that through the tenets of Process theory became meaningful. Nevertheless, it is only readers who will judge how thoroughly criteria have been met considering the “boundary conditions” presented here and in the final chapter.

The next chapter presents the case study in TripAdvisor.

## **Part II**

### **Empirical Setting**

## Chapter 4 Case Study: Exploring TripAdvisor's Dynamics

### 4.1 Introduction: Discovering the labyrinthine nature of TripAdvisor

The objective of this chapter is to explore the main case study within and around TripAdvisor. Although the term *website* already suggests an embedded interlinking phenomenon, experiencing the on-going development of Web 2.0 business through TripAdvisor is like following a moving target. Having studied TripAdvisor in practice, a more fitting metaphor for the multiple purposes and options of engagement with TripAdvisor would be the maze. Certainly, from a methodological perspective, TripAdvisor presented labyrinthine challenges and the researcher found herself in the role of a modern day Theseus who had to find her way. At the heart of chapter 4 lies an attempt to map how travel practices and reputation-making practices have evolved over time building on the initial introduction in the literature review chapter. As explained in the methodology chapter, reputation-making is studied from the standpoint of hoteliers and how they cope with it but also working their way through the maze are bloggers, travel experts and, of course travellers. The latter may base their purchasing decisions upon TripAdvisor rating and ranking; yet they also change and recreate them in a cyclical way.

The main aim of this chapter is to present data that illustrates how reputation-making practices have been transformed in the hospitality sector. This involves describing the information systems that shape, if not create, reputation-making in travel. We will then look more closely at the verification mechanisms and the challenges that these impose upon the legitimacy of hotels. After we have considered traditional quality standards and accreditation, we turn to online user-generated content. This brings us to the emergence of TripAdvisor and we examine the role that it has played in intensifying the sectors' already dedicated focus on service. In the last part of the chapter, the focus shifts and we present data demonstrating the entanglement of reputation-making with travelling and traveller encounters with the places and destinations they visit. This moves us from the more straightforward consideration of the consequences of travel social media for reputation-making in businesses (chapters 6, 7) and primes us for the more philosophical journey characterizing the first analysis chapter (5).

The chapter concludes with a summary and explains how the data in this chapter provides the basis for the analysis chapters that follow.

## **4.2 From making reputation according to given standards to the uncertainty of UGC**

Having reviewed the evolution of the practice of travelling in an earlier chapter, we turn our attention to the reputation-making *systems* put in place over the years to serve as quality assurance regulators. By looking at the standards and criteria enforced by formal accreditation schemes and traditional publication channels, a more contextualized view of hoteliers' reputation-making techniques is gained and we learn how they focus the attention of both service providers and the tourist gaze. When we refer to "schemes", we include not only the contemporary reports produced by official tourism boards such as Visit Britain, but also one-way information publications of all kinds such as travelogues, travel books or ServQual criteria (Parasuraman et al. 1988). We also explore how, internal hotel feedback mechanisms such as comment cards and surveys have persisted in the era of UGC comments.

Long after the epoch of the Grand Tour, tourists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries choosing accommodation would use the infrastructure available for pilgrims and merchants, mainly consisting of hostels and small inns along the road (Stretton 1924). Interestingly, assessing inns' reputations was an integral part of their travel practice. For instance, through letters later published as travelogues we discover that "The Three Kings" in Milan and the "Star" at Padua were preferred by travellers, as was the Faubourg St. Germain in Paris, the Piazza di Spagna in Rome, the "Vaninis" and "Schneiderffs" in Florence and "The Emperor" and "The Red House" in Frankfurt (Towner 1985). These inns achieved reputable standing through the mechanisms in place at this point in history. Let us illustrate how their reputation used to become public with the use of a travelogue written before 1800 and reproduced recently (courtesy of Google play). The title of the book is also informative: "Letters From Italy: Describing The Customs And Manners Of That Country In The Years 1765, And 1766. To Which Is Annexed, And Admonition To Gentlemen Who Pass The Alps, In Their Tour Through Italy". The author, through his reflective narration, recommends the Vaninis in Florence:

“If you should meet with anybody going to Florence, do not forget to recommend the Vaninis. We have had no dispute at partying and they behaved so as not only to merit the character of honest, but even something more that is usually meant by that word; theirs is an honourable honesty, a rare quality in hosts. I think we shall have no reason to complain of the people who keep this inn; they are women and seem much humanized and *serviable*. I break off this letter, as a tolerable supper is just served, and I am a little fatigued with the day’s journey. No post quits Sienna to-night for France, so I shall take this letter with me, and continue it as I fee occasion. Sienna is five posts from Florence” (Sharp 2010).

If you should meet with any body going to Florence, do not forget to recommend the Vaninis. We had no dispute at parting, and they have behaved so as not only to merit the character of honest, but even something more than what is usually meant by that word; theirs is an honourable honesty, a rare quality in hosts. I think we shall have no reason to complain of the people who keep this inn; they are women, and seem much humanized and *serviable*. I break off this letter, as a tolerable supper is just served, and I am a little fatigued

Figure 9 (Original scanned text)

These personal travel accounts were an early manifestation of written word of mouth. The original script is presented alongside the modern text to remind us of the historicity of writing.

Other individuals who have also been influential in travel planning are ‘persons held in high-esteem’ capable of minimizing uncertainty for tourists who find themselves in an unfamiliar place. As Towner (1985) notes, “bankers abroad often provided assistance to the tourist by recommending hotels, engaging servants, forwarding baggage, and suggesting places to visit. They formed one element in an informal system of guidance to the tourist, the most notable of which was the diplomatic service”. Travelogues or bankers’ opinions were informal sources of guidance usually complemented by a formal authority. Towner continues by narrating the actions of the British embassy: “The British embassy would often be the first place a tourist would visit on his arrival in a center. Some representatives like Horace Mann

in Florence (from 1738 to 1786) and William Hamilton in Naples (from 1764 to 1800) organized assemblies and balls for the tourists where they could meet one another and mix with notable local inhabitants" (ibid).

Later we see the emergence of published travel guides such as Baedekers. Scholars of travel anthropology have studied the re-focusing of the 'tourist gaze' over time. However, a remarkably persistent set of categories and concerns still characterize modern day printed guidebooks as we can in the examples below. The first extract is taken from *The Little Black Book of Florence & Tuscany: Essential Guide to the Land of the Renaissance and Rolling Hills* (2010) and is illustrative of the kind of information that travellers can find. Comments such as "luxury and elegant simplicity infuse" or "with sophistication befitting ..." accompanied by price estimations and contact details typify the details one can find in travel guides (see Figure 10).

#### WHERE TO STAY

**Viareggio:** **Hotel Garden (€€)** (*Via U. Foscolo 70, 0584-440.25, [www.hotelgardenviareggio.it](http://www.hotelgardenviareggio.it)*) offers tasteful simplicity. Elegance envelops **Hotel Plaza e de Russie (€-€€€)** (*Piazza d'Azeglio 1, 0584-444.49, [www.plazaederussie.com](http://www.plazaederussie.com)*), a luxury hotel with a roof garden. **Hotel Arcangelo (€)** (*Via Carrara 23, 0584-471.23, [www.hotelarcangelo.com](http://www.hotelarcangelo.com)*) is clean, quiet, and comfortable, with a lovely patio. **Lido di Camaiore:** **Hotel Sylvia (€)** (*Via Manfredi 15, 0584-617.994, [www.hotelsylvia.it](http://www.hotelsylvia.it)*), a quiet, family-run hotel, has a lovely garden and airy rooms. **Camaiore:** Surrounded by steep hills, bougainvillea, jasmine, and lemon trees, **Peralta (€-€€)** (*Via Pieve 321, 0584-951.230, [www.peraltatuscany.com](http://www.peraltatuscany.com)*) is a quirky, rustic, friendly spread owned by a sculptress; art, writing, and cooking classes are offered. **Pietrasanta:** Subdued luxury and elegant simplicity infuse **Albergo Pietrasanta (€€-€€€€)** (*Via Garibaldi 35, 0584-793.726, [www.albergo-pietrasanta.com](http://www.albergo-pietrasanta.com)*) with sophistication befitting the former home of a prestigious family.

Figure 10 Guidebook 2010

Alongside these standardized formats and formal accreditations, confessional and autobiographic accounts also feed into the process through which reputation is temporarily established.

In the twentieth-century, hotel managers designed structured systems to identify potential gaps between customers' expectations and actual service experienced. The SERVQUAL scale for instance, first introduced in the financial sector, has been

adjusted to be used in the hospitality sector. For example, Zeithaml et al. (1990) suggest five factors of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Tangibles refer to physical facilities and infrastructure, reliability embrace the ability to provide what has been promised, responsiveness comes as the alertness to react in favour of good service, assurance is the courtesy of members of staff and empathy refers to the personalized and targeted service (Renganathan 2011). Tourism researchers and practitioners have used SERVQUAL extensively as part of their efforts to develop best practices for hotel managers (see for instance Tribe and Snaith 1998; Markovic and Raspor 2010; Saleh and Ryan 1991; Shameem and Ravichandran 2012). Through their inclusion into formal qualifications and training, the five main categories established through this scholarship were incorporated into the agenda for hoteliers and filtered priorities in the delivery of service.

Formal measures for satisfaction motivated efforts to develop more systematic methods of reputation-making and performance monitoring. This included the standardization of different feedback mechanisms including the guest comment card which still serves as a key management tool for hoteliers (see an example in Figure 11 below). Found either in the room or at the reception, customers can leave their comments by filling in specific categories (informed by SERVQUAL or not) like quality of food, cleanliness, staff's attitude etc. Both research and hoteliers who participated in the study indicate that the response rate is in most cases low (around 5-10%). The comments are then internally analysed, usually by the marketing department, and reports are produced.

 <p><b>HAWTHORNE HOTEL</b></p> <p><i>The friendliness of relaxing at Hawthorne A comfortable bed was the best.</i></p>																																																					
<p>At the Hawthorne Hotel we want your stay to be comfortable, filled with personal service in historic, gracious and friendly surroundings. Please help us anticipate your future needs by telling us about your experience. Thank you.</p>																																																					
<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th colspan="5">Overall satisfaction</th> </tr> <tr> <th></th> <th>1</th> <th>2</th> <th>3</th> <th>4</th> <th>5</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Overall condition/cleanliness of the Hotel</td> <td>1</td> <td>2</td> <td>3</td> <td>4</td> <td>5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Breakfast at Nathaniel's</td> <td>1</td> <td>2</td> <td>3</td> <td>4</td> <td>5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Quality of food and beverage served in your room</td> <td>1</td> <td>2</td> <td>3</td> <td>4</td> <td>5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>What meal did you order from in-room dining?</td> <td>Breakfast</td> <td>Lunch</td> <td>Dinner</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Overall friendliness and efficiency of Hotel Staff</td> <td>1</td> <td>2</td> <td>3</td> <td>4</td> <td>5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Overall satisfaction with your stay at the Hawthorne</td> <td>1</td> <td>2</td> <td>3</td> <td>4</td> <td>5</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>							Overall satisfaction						1	2	3	4	5	Overall condition/cleanliness of the Hotel	1	2	3	4	5	Breakfast at Nathaniel's	1	2	3	4	5	Quality of food and beverage served in your room	1	2	3	4	5	What meal did you order from in-room dining?	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner			Overall friendliness and efficiency of Hotel Staff	1	2	3	4	5	Overall satisfaction with your stay at the Hawthorne	1	2	3	4	5
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<p>Compared with other independent historic hotels, how would you rate the Hawthorne Hotel? <input type="checkbox"/> Less Comparable <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Comparable <input type="checkbox"/> Superior</p> <p><i>Because of our wonderful stay our travel journeys will include</i></p>																																																					
<p>Would you recommend/return to this hotel if in the area again? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><i>Definitely</i></p>																																																					
<p>Primary purpose of visit: <input type="checkbox"/> Conference <input type="checkbox"/> Business <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Pleasure <input type="checkbox"/> Wedding</p>																																																					
<p>Please list and additional comments, or suggestions for improvement, including any staff member that made your stay more enjoyable:</p> <p><i>We decided to spend one night as an extension of our return trip from Cape Cod to Niagara Falls, Canada. I'm extremely glad we did. Not only was it had the longest day to the incredible service, tremendous people, wonderful stay as we would have stayed much longer. The good news we'll definitely be back for a longer visit. And a new adventure. Thank you.</i></p> <p>Name: <i>Richard &amp; Rebecca Saccone</i></p>																																																					

Figure 11 comment card scanned and uploaded on the website of the hotel

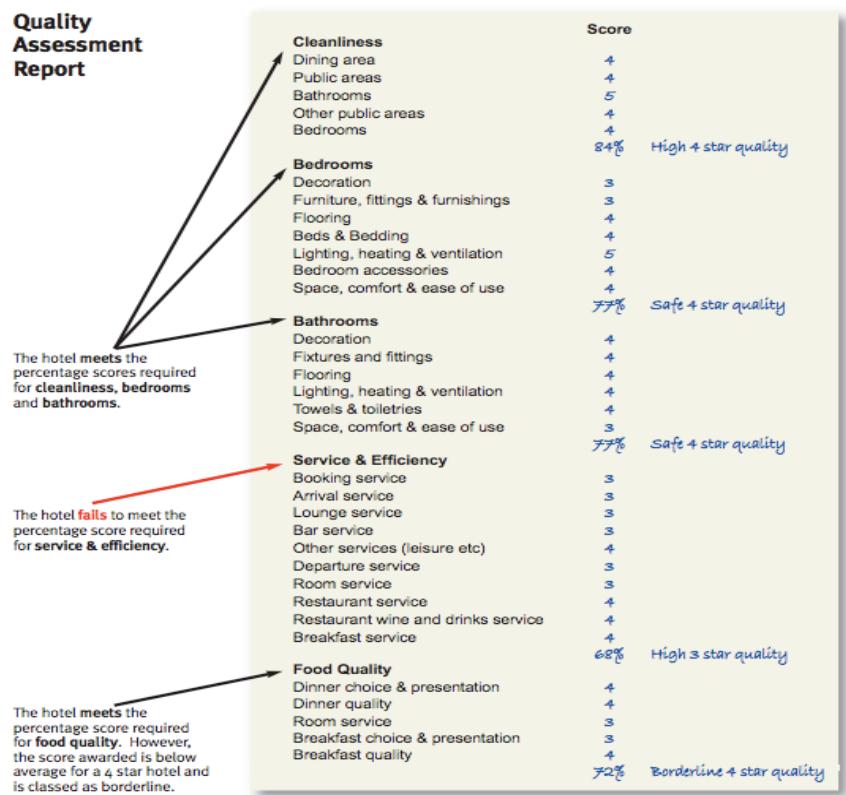
As part of a sector-wide effort to achieve an agreed set of standards and classification, extensive lists with criteria have been introduced and employed in hospitality and travel. These are all important to understand reputation-making and its evolution. Visit Britain, the national tourism agency, has recently updated the standards hotels should comply with in order to be ranked as one to five star premises. The categories include cleanliness, hospitality, bedrooms, bathrooms, food and service (see Figure 12 below).

Hotel	Higher scores now required		Lower scores now required		
	1 Star	2 Star	3 Star	4 Star	5 Star
Overall	30%-46%	47%-54%	55%-69%	70%-84%	85%-100%
Cleanliness	40%	50%	65%	75%	90%
Hospitality	30%	47%	55%	70%	85%
Bedrooms	30%	47%	55%	70%	85%
Bathrooms	30%	47%	55%	70%	85%
Food	30%	47%	55%	70%	85%
Service	30%	47%	55%	70%	85%

Figure 12 Visit Britain criteria for Hotels

The exact mechanism through which a hotel can achieve these percentages are clearly explained in the reports and brochures, the guidelines for a manager are

predefined and known and the procedure has been institutionalized. In particular Visit England in their quality standard report identifies as the key areas cleanliness, bedrooms, bathrooms, service and efficiency, food quality and hospitality and friendliness. They further clarify what they mean by each category. Below is a sample as published by Visit England in 2011 (see Figure 13).



## Figure 13 Visit Britain Quality Assessment Report

For hospitality owners to participate in Visit England's schemes, they have to meet some basic requirements related to number of rooms, serving of meals and bathroom facilities. Hoteliers have to pay a flat annual rate and then a member of Visit England (a trained expert) pays an overnight mystery assessment visit to assess the above criteria and allocate a star rating accompanied by a detailed management report. For the participants who exceed quality of service within their star categories, Visit England offers "unique Gold and Silver awards" (see Figure 14). These awards can then be used to signify "good reputation" both in the physical place of the hotel's premises and their online place: the official website. Visit England's report states about the awards:

“Hotels must demonstrate consistent levels of high quality in the six key areas identified by consumers as very important: A Gold or Silver award

gives hotels a significant marketing advantage – they can feature the award logo on their website as well as display their award certificate at their property”.



**Figure 14 Gold and Silver Awards offered by Visit England as signposts of outstanding quality**

Similarly, Scott and Orlikowski (2010) present in detail how the AA performs assessments and ranks properties and they illustrate how the inspectors consult hotel managers in order to help them improve their performance and thus temporary reputation standing. Besides being a marketing tool for hotel managers such ranking and classification mechanisms broadly inscribe expectations prior to departure and during the stay. These accreditation schemes have been in existence for over 100 years and now condition what most travellers regard as a four or five star hotel and set expectations for the hotel experience. For hoteliers, being a member of schemes such as the AA or Visit England is a recognized part of organizational sustainability: “An AA star rating has traditionally been regarded as a reputational asset and actively incorporated into hotel marketing” (ibid).

The results of the inspection systems and assessment form part of the ratings produced by these national bodies and are included in formal publications used by travellers to choose from orderly rated and ranked lists produced by professionals. Alternative travel guides, such as *Lonely Planet* and *Rough Guides* also help travellers to make choices and reduce uncertainty in unfamiliar places. All these traditional channels have played a key role in making the reputations of hotels, restaurants and destinations. The question then arises, what happened when their online equivalents appeared? Could we talk about an evolutionary transition of offline channels onto the web or would their appearance be emblematic of a more radical transformation?

Before we answer these questions, we will first compare content about a specific resort on Fiji Island. We will start with entries about the hotel in printed guidebooks and then we will juxtapose this with online content. Finally, we present material from blogs and TripAdvisor's reviews about the same resort.

The resort selected to convey the messages and to ground the discussion that follows has received very contradictory comments and evoked strong reactions. If we look at the conventional printed guidebooks we will find a luxurious resort, which might serve as an ideal option for honeymoon (see Figure 15) or we could learn more about its history (see Figure 16) and travel in our imagination to the places in the pictures shown in the glossy magazine (see Figure 17).

**Yasawa Island Resort and Spa ★★★** This luxurious resort sits in a small indentation among steep cliffs about midway up Yasawa Island. The Great Sea Reef is far enough offshore here that surf can slap against shelves of black rock just off a terrific beach of deep white sand. Or you can dip in a saltwater swimming pool. Most of the large, air-conditioned guest bures are long, 93 sq. m (1,000 sq. ft.) rectangular models with thatched roofs over white stucco walls. A door leads from the bathroom, which has an indoor shower, to an outdoor shower and a private sun-bathing patio. A few other one- and two-bedroom models are less appealing but are better arranged for families and have fine views from the side of the hill backing the property. Best of all is the remote, extremely private Lomolagi honeymoon bure, which has its own beach and pool. This is the only Yasawa resort with an airstrip.

P.O. Box 10128, Nadi Airport. **672 2266.** Fax 672 4456. [www.yasawa.com](http://www.yasawa.com). 18 units. US\$890-US\$1,800 double. Rates include all meals and nonmotorized water sports, but no drinks. AE, DC, MC, V. Children 11 and under not accepted except in Jan, mid-June to mid-July, Dec. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; free Internet (in main bldg.); Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; room service; spa; tennis courts; watersports equipment/rentals. *In room:* A/C, ceiling fan, hair dryer, minibar, MP3 docking station, no phone.

**Figure 15 Frommer's Fiji Guidebook 2010: p.141**

For many years, the Fiji government had a policy that the Yasawas were "closed" to land-based tourism development, and it was only after the 1987 coups that approval was granted for the construction of **Yasawa Island Resort** (tel. 666-3364 or 672-2266, [www.yasawa.com](http://www.yasawa.com)). This exclusive Australian-owned resort opened in 1991 on a creamy white beach on Yasawa's upper west side. Most of the resort's employees come from Bukama village, which owns the land. The accommodations consist of six air-conditioned duplexes at F\$1,715 double, 10 one-bedroom deluxes at F\$1,800, one two-bedroom at F\$2,235, and a honeymoon unit at F\$3,100, all plus 15.5 percent tax. Meals are included, but, unlike at most other resorts in this category, alcoholic drinks are *not*. Scuba diving ([www.diveyasawa.com](http://www.diveyasawa.com)), game fishing, and massage also cost extra. Guests must arrive on a chartered flight (F\$775 plus 15 percent tax pp roundtrip), which lands on the resort's private airstrip. Children under 12 are only admitted in January.

Figure 16 Moon Fiji 2007 p188

**Yasawa Island Resort**

**Yasawa Island**  
**Yasawa Group of Islands**  
**Fiji**  
**Phone:** +679 6722 266  
**Fax:** +679 6724 456  
[www.yasawa.com](http://www.yasawa.com)

**Price category:** **EEEE**  
**Rooms:** 18 rooms  
**Facilities:** Lounge, bar, restaurant, boutique, bar/billiard spa, swimming pool, tennis court, beach volleyball  
**Services:** Snorkeling, light handline fishing, kayaks, catamarans, windsurfing, romantic beach picnics, bush walking, safari drives, Blue Lagoon Caves visit  
**Located:** On the beach  
**Public transportation:** 35 min air transfer from Nadi to Yasawa Island Resort serviced with own airstrip  
**Map:** No. 35  
**Style:** Exclusive and contemporary Fijian Styles!  
**What's special:** Remote Island with 18 thatched roof beach huts, beachside Bar/billiard Spa, private picnics on deserted beaches, superb diving, all bungalows have luxury interiors with traditional art and open air showers.

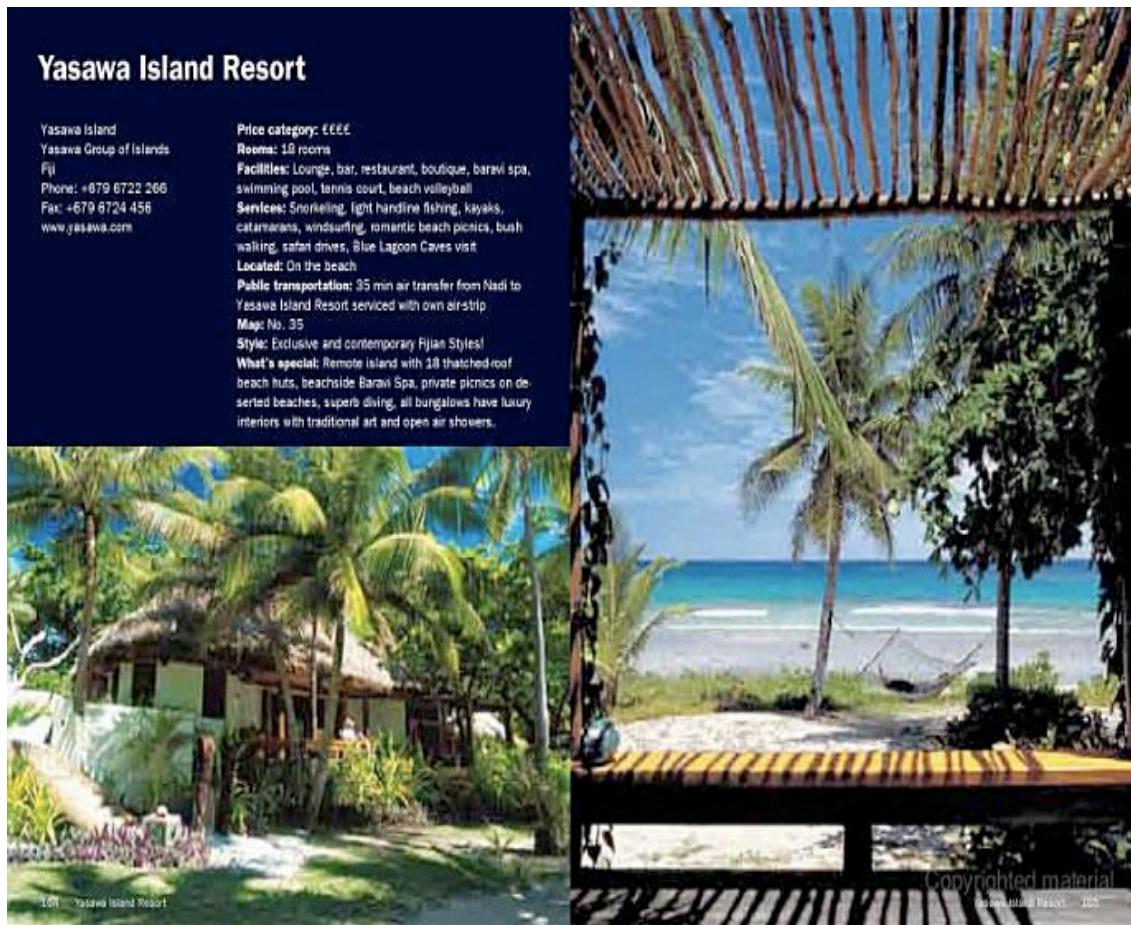


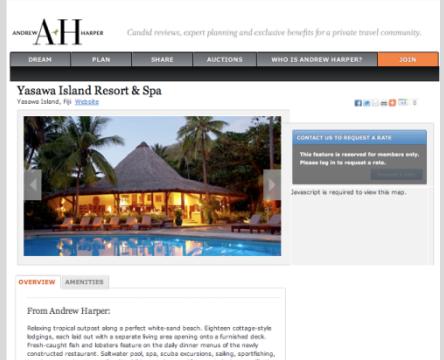
Figure 17 Cool Hotels Beach Resorts 2008

Many travellers that took part in the study noted that they check the date of the material that they find online – in this instance it ranges from 2007 to 2010 - and will search for likely sources of the most up to date content such as the official webpage of the resort. When first visiting the website the user is invited to “paradise” (see Table 10).

Official website	<p><b>Welcome to Paradise!</b> Yasawa Island Resort and Spa is an exclusive retreat on one of the most remote and unspoiled islands of Fiji. Just 18 luxury bungalows are hidden among the palms, each just a few steps from a pristine white beach. Swim in crystal clear waters, dive on vividly colored corals, connect with an ancient culture or indulge in Fiji's first beachfront spa. Whatever you choose to do at Yasawa, you'll do it in complete seclusion.</p>	
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Table 10 Official Website

If one performs some research online about the hotel one will get to know that it has been an award winning resort, some of which also advertised on its website. It has been heralded as the leading Spa Resort in 2007 and the best South Pacific Resort in 2003 (see Table 11).

Andrew Harper Hideaway Report -	<p>From Andrew Harper:</p> <p>Relaxing tropical outpost along a perfect white-sand beach. Eighteen cottage-style lodgings, each laid out with a separate living area opening onto a furnished deck. Fresh-caught fish and lobsters feature on the daily dinner menus of the newly constructed restaurant. Saltwater pool, spa, scuba excursions, sailing, sportfishing, tennis, escorted nature walks. No children under age 12, except during specific time periods.</p>	
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World Travel Awards	Leading Spa Resort 2007	
Hotel Management Awards -	Best South Pacific Resort 2003	

**Table 11 Awards and achievements**

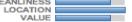
Moving on to online magazines, the user and potential customer searching for information about the resort still receives very complimentary comments, a delight for every hotel manager as well as a strong nomination for luxurious and romantic gateways (see Table 12).

World Magazine New Zealand	“Simply Heaven”, by Patrick Smith	
Sydney Morning Herald, by Carol Nader	<p>“Private Paradise”</p> <p>“Welcome to paradise,” drool an American couple who have spent the week at the resort and are awaiting the plane that will return them to Nadi. They continue their chatter as we drink a glass of guava and mango juice decorated with a cherry and a slice of orange.....</p> <p>Indeed, it's easy to forget all sense of time here and the isolation means you can effortlessly go missing for days.</p>	
Australian Women's Weekly, by Deborah Thomas.	“South Pacific Paradise”	

Frommer's	<p>Yasawa Island Resort &amp; Spa sits on one of the prettiest beaches and has a low-key, friendly ambience. It has large bungalows, the choice being the secluded honeymoon unit sitting by its own beach; it even has its own pool.</p>	<p><b>Yasawa Island Resort and Spa</b> </p> <p>REVIEW MAP IT PHOTOS &amp; VIDEO</p> <p>Like Be the first of your friends to like this. ShareThis Print RSS</p> <p><b>Location</b> Yasawa Island, 100km/60 miles north of Nadi, 35 min. by charter flight, The Yasawa Islands</p> <p><b>Phone</b> 672 2222</p> <p><b>Fax</b> 672 4456</p> <p><b>Web site</b> <a href="http://www.yasawa.com">www.yasawa.com</a></p> <p><b>Room Information</b> 18 units</p> <p><b>Prices</b> US\$900-US\$1,800 (E450-E900) double. Rates include room, all meals, and nonmotorized watersports, but no drinks</p> <p><b>Credit Cards</b> AE, DC, MC, V</p> <p><b>In Room Amenities</b> A/C, coffeemaker, iron, kitchen (2 units), minibar, safe</p> <p><b>Kids</b> Children 11 and under not accepted except in Jan, mid-June to mid-July, Dec</p> <p><b>Other</b> P.O. Box 10128, Nadi, Airport</p> <p><b>Yasawa Island Resort and Spa</b> Review</p> <p>This luxurious resort sits in a small indentation among steep cliffs about midway up Yasawa Island. The Great Sea Reef is far enough offshore here that surf can slap against shelves of black rock just off a terrific beach of deep white sand. Or you can dip in a saltwater swimming pool. Most of the large, air-conditioned guest bures are long, 93 sq. m (1,000 sq. ft.); rectangular models with thatched roofs over white stucco walls. A door leads from the bathroom, which has an indoor shower, to an outdoor shower and a private sunbathing patio. A few other one- and two-bedroom models are less appealing but are better arranged for families (although children</p> <p></p>
	<p>Yasawa Island Resort &amp; Spa sits on one of the prettiest beaches and has a low-key, friendly ambience. It has large bungalows, the choice being the secluded honeymoon unit sitting by its own beach; it even has its own pool.</p>	<p><b>Frommers</b></p> <p>HOME DESTINATIONS HOTELS TRIP IDEAS DEALS &amp; NEWS TIPS &amp; TOOLS TRIP RECOMMENDER</p> <p>Get Inspired by Frommers</p> <p><b>South Pacific</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduction</li> <li>• Best Dining Bits</li> <li>• The Best After-Dark</li> <li>• The Best Beaches</li> </ul> <p><b>The Best Romantic Hotels &amp; Resorts</b></p>

Table 12 Online Magazines presentation

This positive impression continues in travel blogs and communities which describe it as an absolute paradise for romance (Table 13):

Yahoo Travel	<p><b>Absolute Paradise+Romance</b></p> <p>Yasawa Island Resort is a great place to celebrate a special or important time in your life. The people and staff at Yasawa are very friendly, helpful and considerate. The "bures" were very modern and well equipped with all the essentials. The food was outstanding with a variety of choices. The beaches are beautiful and very private. You have no one bothering you or trying to sell you anything. It is just you and the ocean.</p>	<p><b>Yasawa Island Resort, Yasawa Island</b> Fijian Archipelago, Yasawa Island Fiji</p> <p>★★★★★  Users Rating (11) <a href="#">Read Reviews</a> »</p> <p><b>Check Rates and Availability</b></p> <p>Check-in: <input type="text" value="10/02/2010"/> Check-out: <input type="text" value="10/10/2010"/> Adults: <input type="text" value="2"/> Children: <input type="text" value="2"/> <a href="#">CHECK RATES</a></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hotels.com <input type="checkbox"/> Venere.com <input type="checkbox"/> Expedia.com</p> <p>Clicking may open more than one new browser window.</p> <p><a href="#">Add your photos of this Hotel</a></p> <p><a href="#">View photos</a> <a href="#">Add to trip</a> <a href="#">Email</a></p> <p><b>Yahoo! User Reviews</b> 6 reviews for Yasawa Island Resort, Yasawa Island</p> <p><a href="#">WRITE A REVIEW</a></p> <p><b>AVERAGE OVERALL RATING</b> ★★★★★</p> <p><b>SORT BY:</b> <a href="#">Most Recent</a>   <a href="#">Positive</a>   <a href="#">Negative</a>   <a href="#">Most Helpful</a></p> <p><b>Absolute Paradise+Romance</b> By Jennifer, 11/13/06</p> <p>Yasawa Island Resort is a great place to celebrate a special or important time in your life. The people and staff at Yasawa are very friendly, helpful and considerate. The "bures" were very modern and well equipped with all the essentials. There is even air conditioning. Our only gripe was the bugs (mosquitoes, etc.) which are to be expected on a tropical island, so it was to be expected. The food was outstanding with a variety of choices. They also have an extensive bar from mai tais to very expensive champagnes. The beaches are beautiful and very private. You have no one bothering you or trying to sell you anything. It is just you and the ocean. The snorkeling is most amazing.</p> <p>Was this review helpful? (Yes — No) <a href="#">Report a problem</a></p> <p>1 of 1 Yahoo! Users found this review helpful</p> <p><b>USER RATING</b> ★★★★★</p> <p><b>SERVICE</b>  <b>CLEANLINESS</b>  <b>LOCATION</b>  <b>VALUE</b> </p>
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Travel Blog	<p>Here you will find no other resorts, no televisions, no traffic and no mobile phones - your only neighbors being in 6 nearby Fijian villages.35 minutes from Nadi International Airport, the 18 luxury bures are spread out among the palms. Each bure is air-conditioned with its own thatched beach hut, a pair of outdoor day-beds on a spacious sundeck, a discreet outdoor shower and a hammock strung between the palms. Supreme among Yasawas Bures is the spacious Lomalagi Honeymoon Bure, located on its own secluded beach with a private wet edge lap pool. Treat yourself to a soothing massage at the beachfront Baravi Spa in a spectacular setting open to the sea breezes and the soothing rhythmic sound of the waves, or join Captain Greg Muddy Edwards aboard the MV Megumi for a Game Fishing experience of a lifetime. Getting There: A daily scheduled 35 minute flight to the Resort departs daily from Nadi Airport at 2pm and arrives in Yasawa Island Airstrip at 2.35pm. The return daily flight departs Yasawa at 2.45pm and arrives into Nadi Airport at 3.20pm. Please note, that there is a strict 15kg luggage restriction per person on the flights. For Guests arriving too early or later than the standard scheduled timings, charter air transfers are available on request. Please contact Yasawa Island Resort directly to have transfers organized: Phone +679 6722 266, Email: <a href="mailto:reservations@yasawa.com">reservations@yasawa.com</a>.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Yasawa Island Resort And Spa</b></p> <p><b>Address</b> Yasawa Island</p> <p><b>General Description</b></p> <p>Revel in secluded solitude at Yasawa Island Resort &amp; Spa. Here you will find no other resorts, no televisions, no traffic and no mobile phones - your only neighbors being in 6 nearby Fijian villages.35 minutes from Nadi International Airport, the 18 luxury bures are spread out among the palms. Each bure is air-conditioned with its own thatched beach hut, a pair of outdoor day-beds on a spacious sundeck, a discreet outdoor shower and a hammock strung between the palms. Supreme among Yasawas Bures is the spacious Lomalagi Honeymoon Bure, located on its own secluded beach with a private wet edge lap pool. Treat yourself to a soothing massage at the beachfront Baravi Spa in a spectacular setting open to the sea breezes and the soothing rhythmic sound of the waves, or join Captain Greg Muddy Edwards aboard the MV Megumi for a Game Fishing experience of a lifetime. Getting There: A daily scheduled 35 minute flight to the Resort departs daily from Nadi Airport at 2pm and arrives in Yasawa Island Airstrip at 2.35pm. The return daily flight departs Yasawa at 2.45pm and arrives into Nadi Airport at 3.20pm. Please note, that there is a strict 15kg luggage restriction per person on the flights. For Guests arriving too early or later than the standard scheduled timings, charter air transfers are available on request. Please contact Yasawa Island Resort directly to have transfers organized: Phone +679 6722 266, Email: <a href="mailto:reservations@yasawa.com">reservations@yasawa.com</a>.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">• 24 Hour Reception    • Air Conditioned    • Airport shuttle  • Bar / Lounge    • CD Player    • Coffee / Tea Maker  • Currency Exchange    • Hair Dryer    • High-speed Internet  • Laundry service    • Mini Bar    • Refrigerator  • Restaurant    • Room Service    • Safe-Deposit Box  • Spa bath / Jacuzzi    • Swimming pool    • Tennis Courts</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><a href="#">Book this hotel</a></p>																																													
Fodor's	<p><b>Fodor's Review:</b></p> <p>Picnic excursions to one of 11 deserted beaches and excellent in-house diving and high-tech game fishing are among the first-rate options at this boutique resort. The remote region's resistance to modernism means guests can visit especially traditional villages and see a particularly meaningful <i>meke</i> (traditional dances). A world-class Baravi spa commands magnificent ocean views from beneath a thatched roof at the water's edge. All the open-plan bures are airy, modern twists on the Fijian style set on the beach. Each has indoor and outdoor showers and dual sinks.</p>	<p style="color: orange;"><b>Fodor's Choice Mamanuca and Yasawa Groups Hotels</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><a href="#">Hotels Overview »</a></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: left; padding: 2px;">Name</th> <th style="text-align: left; padding: 2px;">Price</th> <th style="text-align: left; padding: 2px;">Location</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><a href="#">Beachcomber Island Resort</a> </td> <td style="padding: 2px; text-align: right;">\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Mamanuca Islands</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3" style="padding: 2px;">Every day's spring break and every morning's a challenge for most... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><a href="#">Likuliku Lagoon</a> </td> <td style="padding: 2px; text-align: right;">\$\$\$\$</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Mamanuca Islands</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3" style="padding: 2px;">Bures that perch entirely over the water, reached by a boardwalk... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><a href="#">Malolo Island Resort</a> </td> <td style="padding: 2px; text-align: right;">\$\$\$</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Mamanuca Islands</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3" style="padding: 2px;">Spacious bures leading out to a fantastic beach, three restaurants... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><a href="#">Navutu Stars Resort</a> </td> <td style="padding: 2px; text-align: right;">\$\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$\$</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Yasawa Islands</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3" style="padding: 2px;">A metropolitan Italian couple built this resort as an escape... <a href="#">Write a review</a>   Avg. member rating: 5.0/5</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><a href="#">Octopus Resort</a> </td> <td style="padding: 2px; text-align: right;">\$</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Yasawa Islands</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3" style="padding: 2px;">The best budget resort west of the mainland is set on an dreamy... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><a href="#">Tokoriki Island Resort</a> </td> <td style="padding: 2px; text-align: right;">\$\$\$\$</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Mamanuca Islands</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3" style="padding: 2px;">Honeymooners and couples swoon over the privacy, beautiful grounds... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;"><a href="#">Yasawa Island Resort</a> </td> <td style="padding: 2px; text-align: right;">\$\$\$\$</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Yasawa Islands</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3" style="padding: 2px;">Picnic excursions to one of 11 deserted beaches and excellent... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p style="text-align: right;"><a href="#">Hotels Overview »</a></p>	Name	Price	Location	<a href="#">Beachcomber Island Resort</a>	\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$	Mamanuca Islands	Every day's spring break and every morning's a challenge for most... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a>			<a href="#">Likuliku Lagoon</a>	\$\$\$\$	Mamanuca Islands	Bures that perch entirely over the water, reached by a boardwalk... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a>			<a href="#">Malolo Island Resort</a>	\$\$\$	Mamanuca Islands	Spacious bures leading out to a fantastic beach, three restaurants... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a>			<a href="#">Navutu Stars Resort</a>	\$\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$\$	Yasawa Islands	A metropolitan Italian couple built this resort as an escape... <a href="#">Write a review</a>   Avg. member rating: 5.0/5			<a href="#">Octopus Resort</a>	\$	Yasawa Islands	The best budget resort west of the mainland is set on an dreamy... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a>			<a href="#">Tokoriki Island Resort</a>	\$\$\$\$	Mamanuca Islands	Honeymooners and couples swoon over the privacy, beautiful grounds... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a>			<a href="#">Yasawa Island Resort</a>	\$\$\$\$	Yasawa Islands	Picnic excursions to one of 11 deserted beaches and excellent... <a href="#">Be the first to write a review</a>		
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**Table 13 Travel Blogs and Fora**

The multiple enactments of the same place have prepared the ground for another “system<sup>9</sup>”, which manages/ creates expectations for travellers on the one hand and has intensified reputation-making for hoteliers on the other: TripAdvisor. First, two very negative reviews are presented about the “Paradise Resort” and then we move on to look more closely at the verification mechanisms triggered by these postings (see Table14).

<sup>9</sup> System is used here as equivalent to an “engine”, not “a camera” (see page 68).

Trip Advisor	<p>Yasawa Island Resort was a dreadful experience. Starting with a flight into the island that meant landing in a field (no runway) with a pilot who didn't look a day over 16 and had just received his pilot's license and it went downhill from there! The place is so infested with ants.....I've been to tropical islands before but haven't seen anything like this. Ants crawling in your bed does not make for a good night's rest.. This island is the hottest location in a hot country so if you don't like to sweat, don't come here. The air conditioning consists of a tiny unit for a very large cottage.....it couldn't begin to do the job. And the cottage did not receive any ocean breeze at all, leaving only ceiling fans to provide any relief. The food was lackluster at best and though there is a good wine list there is no server who knows anything about it. And don't depend on the "no children" policy.....that was cast aside because "they didn't have enough bookings". My advice.....stay somewhere else! Take a look at Namale which was truly a dream destination.</p>	<p><b>REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT</b></p>
	<p>I just can't believe this resort still gets good reviews. My wife and I went to 3 resorts on our honeymoon (Matangi, Namale, Yasawa), and Yasawa was the only disappointment. The setting is beautiful, but the stunning beach and clear blue water can't make up for lousy service, old rooms and terrible management. As others have mentioned, we had many many cockroaches in our room. When we mentioned this to the staff they gave me a bottle of bug spray to go take care of the problem myself. Not the level of service you would expect at a 5 star resort. Despite our best efforts we were unable to eliminate the roaches and I asked to speak with the manager, however he was never available because he went out fishing everyday we were there. The staff and management seem to take the attitude that they are they for vacation as well, not to service the guest. Bottom line is this resort is in desperate need of renovations and new management. If going to Fiji for your honeymoon try a different resort.</p>	<p><b>REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT</b></p>

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**Table 14 TripAdvisor presentation**

The first two rows of Table 14 present users' reviews who claimed to have been at the resort, while the last one is a posting on TripAdvisor's Forum where users ask for more details about the place because they are confused by the contradictory reviews. Around the same time that these very negative reviews appeared online, the resort started receiving a large number of excellent reviews in a very limited time period. When an editor at *Travel Trends* online magazine published an article with an analysis of the pattern of reviews appearing for this particular, TripAdvisor's team investigated the situation further and decided to remove all the positive reviews posted during the period of time highlighted by the magazine editor. These tensions and verification procedures alongside their implications for reputation-making are going to be described in the next section and then further analysed in chapter 7.

A place that is enacted so differently - either as paradise or hell - provides an extreme illustration of the multiplicity characterizing the multiple sources of travel information. The media involved in creating or damaging reputations construct accounts through reviews and rating but are also accountable. In order to be trusted, they themselves have to establish their reputational standing and credibility through similar procedures alongside the businesses whose content they host. Therefore, as we will see in the next section, TripAdvisor has been called to defend its legitimacy as an influential mechanism through which hotel reputation is temporarily made or broken. In the next section, we will turn our attention to how and when TripAdvisor became such a powerful reference point for travel information.

### 4.3 TripAdvisor: A brief history

TripAdvisor's inception bears no similarity with its evolution and current state. The site was not going to be user-generated but instead a travel-related search engine with mostly editorial content. It began as a search type platform focusing on travel, which would provide formal information edited by the administrators of the website. TripAdvisor's Vice President of Partnerships said about the genesis of the idea:

“You start with an idea but the idea doesn't necessarily generate that you hoped it would, I think that was true in our case where it was almost by accident that on TA test site consumers started posting reviews and then we saw that there was more traffic to that part of the operation than the initial business idea which was more about aggregating and licensing content so I think what is the moral of the story is listen to your consumers and keep testing and keep iterating.”

When Steven Kaufer and the co-founders of TripAdvisor approached Lykos, Yahoo, AOL and other search engines to present their idea and business plan the search engines' owners mostly wanted to charge them rather than pay them for the product so it did not work out as a business model. Steven Kaufer shared his story of how TripAdvisor included 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 travellers thought, honest opinions, the good the bad, the candid photos. It was very 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 so with 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 travellers liked and didn't like.

As with most entrepreneurs, Kaufer's personal need inspired a business plan that through trials and tribulations became a viable business.

So when I couldn't find that myself and co-founders Langley Steinert, Nick Shanny and Tom Palka decided to build the website that would offer this sort of functionality for free to visitors and originally we had a business model of showing candid input, candid reviews in a b-2-b model, we would build a rich database of information all about where to go, what to do, where to stay and licensed that database to folks like Expedia and Travelocity, Yahoo Travel and AOL Travel and Lycos

Travel, other sites that already had a lot of consumers. We found that none of those sites were interested in our offering or they were all very interested but they were just not willing to pay for it. So we ended up creating a consumer site ourselves and we were lucky enough to get some traffic to the site and with the traffic to the site and being free to the consumer we turned into a Google ID source for places that could actually take the reservation mostly the online travel agencies so we went through the first year and a half close to two years without making any money and then by March 2002 we made about \$ 70.000, it was slightly more than our burn rate so that profitable and then profitable every month thereafter growing to what Expedia reported as close to 300.000.000 revenue last year on TA and the dozen companies we have acquired over the last couple of years”

(Interview with TA President and CEO).

This story reveals how an individual need for new structures in the information economy has come to epitomize social media in tourism and in turn fuelled a set of transformations in reputation-making. The emergence of TripAdvisor marked a transition from the standard categories and regulated language of hotel accreditation schemes to knowledge generated by the crowd. Now that some background information about TripAdvisor’s genesis is known, contextual and historical information is presented about the main case of this study.

TripAdvisor was founded in February 2000 and it is considered the largest travel community in the sector “with more than 60 million reviews and opinions and nearly 69 million unique visitors a month<sup>10</sup>”. In 2004, IAC/InterActiveCorp bought TripAdvisor for \$430 million and then Expedia group acquired it until 2011 at which time it returned to sole ownership. Its revenue comes mainly from travel-related advertising and links to travel agents. Its algorithms search a database of over 600,000 hotels, 858,000 restaurants and 198,000 attractions representing a free travel guide and research website that offers reviews and information. Although it is most well-known for its reviews and rating capability, TripAdvisor also hosts Forums in which travellers can exchange views, recommend resorts and in general interact with the rest members of the ‘community’. It has also launched *Inside*, an online collaborative travel guidebook and goLists which are user-created lists of suggestions and destinations. Furthermore it has introduced TravelNetwork as a

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.TripAdvisor.com/pages/about\\_us.html](http://www.TripAdvisor.com/pages/about_us.html)

social networking platform which promotes connectivity and interaction placing TripAdvisor in the category of “next-generation travel portals”.

TripAdvisor has also bought Cruise Critic, the leading online cruise community and five travel community web domains, namely Smarter Travel Media LLC, operator of smartertravel.com and bookingbuddy.com; SeatGuru.com; TravelPod.com and Travel-Library.com. One of the biggest travel communities, Virtual Tourist, has also joined TripAdvisor’s Group along with Airfare Watchdog.com. The “TripAdvisor Galaxy<sup>11</sup>” also comprises Flipkey, OneTime.com HolidayWatchdog and 19 popular travel brands in total. Several important partnerships and agreements have been reported involving companies such as Easyjet, jet Airways, Hotels.com, Yahoo Travel, British Airways, German hotel group Maritim, Thomas Cook UK & Ireland, Hilton, TUI, Lastminute and many more<sup>12</sup>. The General Manager of TripAdvisor said about the partnerships and the benefits they enjoy:

“We make money by heading visitors off to our booking partners for people that want to investigate price, availability and actually then book...The reason we have partners who spend a lot of money with us is because we drive really qualified traffic and by qualified I mean there is a great likelihood of them booking than through most channels. So it's highly efficient for partners and I think that's only the case because people who come get much closer to their point of decision...you can't look to a direct correlation but we have pretty much every booking site that you could imagine as a partner, many of whom will take as much traffic as we can give them because the people who come from TripAdvisor are converted booking at a very good rate and I would trace that back to how well we help them make decisions” (GM, TripAdvisor).

Such a claim indicates the degree of influence that TA has on buying decisions, an issue that will be of interest later in the thesis.

Relatively recently TripAdvisor launched the “Owners center”, which allows owners to know instantly what is being written about their properties, to compare statistics and graphs. On the main website, users can personalize their accounts, save attractions, hotels etc. on “My Trips” folders, add maps and notes about future trips. They can compare prices moving one step closer to the actual booking decision.

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.hotel-blogs.com/guillaume\\_thevenot/2008/07/so-what-tripadv.html](http://www.hotel-blogs.com/guillaume_thevenot/2008/07/so-what-tripadv.html)

<sup>12</sup> More information about TA in the appendix

Users can also bookmark reviews and organize their travel itinerary whenever they wish.

The Business Listing Service is a relatively new feature launched in January 2010 which gives hoteliers the opportunity to pay a fee (flat annual rate) that allows them to put a link from TripAdvisor to their websites and include their details or special offers on TripAdvisor's site. This is thus a different kind of partnership to the one described above whereby hoteliers pay an annual rate to be included in the scheme of Visit Britain and the AA.

TripAdvisor has attempted to proliferate value creating marketing mechanisms in various online websites: starting with YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, widgets for iGoogle called "Window to the World - Amazing Destinations", Google Earth mashups, Yahoo answers profile, Google plus profile and the list goes on. From time to time there are partners who provide supplementary services such as flight meta-search and vacation rentals but the most distinctive sections are the user-generated reviews which are used to produce the main TripAdvisor Popularity Index. This index is the algorithm identifying which hotel is ranked best in every region. The fora host different kind of content and there is where most of the interactions among users take place.

Thus TripAdvisor is a multipurpose webpage. Travellers can gain timely information based on reviews, have the chance to contribute content and initiate dialogues with hotel managers and owners, can have access to a vast majority of topics on the fora, where they can also interact with fellow travellers either publicly or in private through the private messaging system. The "Check Prices" functionality enables travellers to click from TripAdvisor to booking websites owned by selected online travel agents or airlines who partner with TripAdvisor. Or travellers can simply browse TripAdvisor without being a member and leave without contributing or transacting. In contrast although hoteliers cannot opt out from TripAdvisor nor can they remove their property from any part of the rating system. What they can do - in addition to monitor reviews in the owners centre - is to reply to users' through the option of the 'management response'. Some hoteliers elect to take up this option but many refuse to engage on what they regard as a "website for travellers, by travellers".

All content posted by TripAdvisor members is processed using the same algorithmic logic and they share a common code of content. Every subscribed user has a standard profile page on which they can elect to add their travel preferences and map of places they have visited. They may or may not use their real name (pseudonyms are frequently chosen) and include some personal data with a picture if they want to share. For each member, TripAdvisor users can access a list with all the posts and reviews contributed which enables them to build up an idea of the reviewer's taste, writing style and habits in order to help them evaluate the content that they post. Reviewers get a badge next to their nickname and the relevant stars based on the numbers of their reviews, as below:

- 3-5 Reviews = White Star with Green Border = Reviewer
- 6-10 Reviews = Light Green Star = Senior Reviewer
- 11-20 Reviews = Dark Green Star = Contributor
- 21-49 Reviews = Dark Green Star with Gold Border = Senior Contributor
- 50+ Reviews = Gold Star with Gold Border = Top Contributor

Lately users can mark reviews and in this way they also collect helpful reviews badges on their profiles (see figures 18 and 19).

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**Figure 18 Personal profile on TA (About me and Travel preferences section)**

**REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT**

**Figure 19 Personal profile on TA (Contributions and useful votes)**

The more active members on the fora are called Destination Experts in most versions of TripAdvisor –the Spanish community uses the title “Passionate travellers” because of cultural issues and mentality-.

“They are people that we have seen their posts in the past, we know that they are giving good answers in a warm way, that they know that area well, they are friendly people so that, it is more than reading a guide book, it’s a more personal approach. So when we find a user like that we approach that user and say we really appreciate all of your posts and how helpful you’ve been so would like to become a destination expert which means that they actually get a little badge next to their name but they also get an email any time that a post has been made to their forum if anyone comes on to post something for Paris the destination expert will get an email at the end of the day saying there has been a new post. Other users see the kind of content that’s been given by those users, it inspires them to give better content as well if they missed out on something if they would come in and fill in the gaps so it’s kind of a lead by example thing” (TA European Community and Forum Manager).

This is illustrative of the way in which community elicits behaviour from members that benefits the community as a whole. Destination experts can also be suggested by other users from the community, who guarantee about their vast breadth of knowledge and the warm, inspiring style.

#### **4.4 Verification mechanisms in place**

As the main focus of the study is centred around the reviews section, we will first look at the tensions created by the design of the dynamic ranking mechanism. The Popularity Index<sup>13</sup> is one of the core mechanisms used by TripAdvisor to rank accommodation. It produces a list of properties in a geographical location each of which is allocated a descending numerical position based upon user-generated content (primarily click-button scales from 1-5 for specific categories). Users can then make selections among these hotels based on their travel interests and needs. On the other end of this dynamic relationship, hoteliers watch how the Popularity Index puts them at the top and promotes their businesses or throws them to the bottom of the list with negative consequences for their reservation revenue.

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<sup>13</sup> “The TripAdvisor Popularity Index incorporates Traveler Ratings to determine traveler satisfaction. Emphasis is placed on the most recent information. We calculate the Popularity Index using an algorithm” in [http://www.tripadvisor.in/help/how\\_does\\_the\\_popularity\\_index\\_work](http://www.tripadvisor.in/help/how_does_the_popularity_index_work).

TripAdvisor has a long section dedicated to norms and netiquettes explaining what is acceptable in terms of content, style and purpose. Briefly stated, reviews have to be family-friendly, written by actual travellers, relevant to other travellers, unique and independent, submitted for an appropriate property and by users with a valid e-mail<sup>14</sup>. Although there is some manual intervention by a team of content managers, the vast number of reviews (over 60 million) means that TripAdvisor staff relies upon automated tools and algorithms to regulate content. This creates a novel set of relational dynamics between hotels, algorithms, members, moderators and content managers. 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,

“fortunately 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)

In general TripAdvisor is emblematic of the development of social media in many ways, for example it is an exemplar of bottom-up governance. In addition to providing the reviews and ratings that serve as input and fuel the TripAdvisor algorithms, there are also mechanisms through which members can report suspicious reviews to the content management team. For example, at TripAdvisor the content managers say that:

“Whenever we find out about a property offering an incentive – and we promote travelers to let us know – we get in touch with them. We determine if they are unaware of our policy, and made an honest mistake, or if there was an attempt to game the system. In the latter case, they are subject to a diversity of penalties, and their property is no longer eligible for inclusion in our Travelers' Choice awards and Top 10 lists. Also, reviews that are shown to have been submitted as part of the incentive program will be further verified and potentially removed”.

(Content management Director, TripAdvisor)

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.TripAdvisor.com/help/our\\_guidelines\\_for\\_traveler\\_reviews](http://www.TripAdvisor.com/help/our_guidelines_for_traveler_reviews)

The official position of the company is that in order to maintain a proprietary hold on the algorithm and avoid gaming by businesses, they do not disclose details about how it ranks properties. 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. A computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University wrote his own script to filter out possible fraudulent reviews by implementing his intuitive assumptions about what might be a fake review.

“Fake reviews will tend to come from "users" who have made very few other reviews. The intuition is that, if your goal is to increase the average rating of a specific hotel, it takes too much extra work to write reviews of other hotels just for the purpose of making your account seem more real<sup>15</sup>”.

His hypothesis proved statistically significant after testing the script with 25 hotels. As a procedure this did not reveal much about the actual algorithm that TripAdvisor uses but it is still an example of efforts made by many people who try to deconstruct the logic behind.

Christopher Elliott, travel expert writing in the New York Times, revealed the name of a key TripAdvisor employee responsible for the Popularity Index algorithm on his blog but said that he:

“...would not disclose how the program worked because he did not want to tip off hotels on how to circumvent it. Nor will he say how many reviews have been weeded out by the application”<sup>16</sup>.

The General Manager during the interview in London said about the algorithm:

“It is something we keep to ourselves, we feel it's an important distinguishing feature for TripAdvisor, but I think it's fair to say that it's almost wholly based on reviews and opinions that we get so it's very much core to our proposition that we are flexible what the community feels about the hotels.

Similarly, Steven Kaufer in Boston gave his answer to how the algorithm works:

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<sup>15</sup> <http://vonahn.blogspot.com/2009/01/tripadvisor.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/07/business/07guides.html>

“We want our results to be as authentic as we can possibly make them. In the end of the day when you have 500 reviews its almost hard for an algorithm to go wrong but for instance a review written 4 years ago in our system doesn’t carry the weight that a review written yesterday does. You know if I told you exactly the weighting it wouldn’t be meaningful to you, it’s not particularly meaningful to me but obviously we are trying to have our algorithm offering the best recommendation we can and recently we’ve broken it down by different types of travellers, if you are a family traveller you can read the reviews of families that like this hotel, we have a new business centre, so if you are looking for business hotel that may be different than the number one overall rated hotel and will show that to you” (Co-founder and CEO, TripAdvisor).

Director of Sales Europe, maintained that all content is first checked before it goes live, but also other methods to ensure integrity are in place, such as automated tools that in combination with the expertise of the content managers catch most of the fraudulent reviews.

“Basically all the content that we have whether be photos, videos or written text is all reviewed before it goes live so we have a process there whereby we check the quality: Clean and non-defamatory, obviously we can’t publish any photos or videos that you wouldn’t want anyone to view and we can’t have things like swearwords in the written. So if any of that happens then we just reply to the user and say effectively we are very sorry, we can’t put this up” (Sales Director, Europe).

It is important to present the position of TripAdvisor with regards to the verification mechanism they use to ensure the credibility of reviews, as this is an integral part of how reputation-making and the practice of travelling have been transformed. In this spirit we finally present what the Vice President of user experience explained about the principles, yet without entering into the specifics about how they identify fraudulent behaviour.

“On the review front, what our goal is if not our method of achieving it is that we 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 to the site or cannot be published to the site but we never make editorial suggestions because its really UG its not 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 its about something completely or if its defamation of some people specifically or if it has commercial links in it

that 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".

Even though TripAdvisor's fraud detection algorithm is purported to detect fake reviews the issue of manipulation - the potential number of favourable reviews submitted by people connected with a hotel or negative reviews by competitors - 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. It has become a common knowledge among the industry professionals that reputation professionals are hired to write positive reviews about properties; a VP of a major PR firm stated: "Posting on TripAdvisor, for example, is the most basic of tactics in the PR 2.0 world<sup>17</sup>." This is presented as a response to a phenomenon that hoteliers have never been asked whether they are willing to engage with and to what degree; in the beginning this was treated as a defense against losing control over their reputation. Travel professionals have developed the skill of guessing whether a review is written by a non traveller, as in many cases PR professionals use jargon language.

Although no participant in the study has confessed about any attempts to improve their rankings, travel expert, Christopher Elliott includes in his article the confession of a restaurant owner who submitted his own reviews about his business, thereby manipulating the algorithm. He artificially created an algorithmic history and pumped his hotel's reputation by posting fake reviews.

"I live in Costa Rica and used to own a very popular restaurant in a resort town on the pacific coast. My restaurant was a huge success, and for the most part my advertising was word of mouth. Any time you get a group of gringos together, they WILL compare notes on the must do's and must don'ts. We quickly became a must-do.

I began tracking feedback about my restaurant on TripAdvisors "rants and raves" page. It very quickly occurred to me that I could write glowing reviews about my own restaurant and up my ratings numbers.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://beatofhawaii.com/tripadvisor-and-the-big-business-of-fake-reviews-part-2/>

Luckily, that wasn't necessary at first. We had some great reviews from actual real life clients and we maintained a 4 to 4.5 rating.

After a period of time, I began to see my rating slide a bit after some not so positive postings by supposedly "real" customers. The complaints that were written about seemed somewhat contrived, and as I was owner and general manager I would have become aware very quickly about these types of complaints. Were they posted by my competition? Perhaps, but I didn't let it concern me too much. I simply got on TripAdvisor and bombarded them with glowing reviews about my own restaurant! Within days, I was rated a perfect 5! During that same time my competitors' ratings mysteriously declined, and the negative reviews for their restaurants came from all over the US — including Debby from Dallas! No joke.

I still use TripAdvisor for my travels around the globe, but I always throw out the high and the low score and rely on what lies in the middle - usually the truth".

The restaurant owner intervened attempting to steer his reputational standing, negating the effect of consumer reviews by creating his own. The dynamism of algorithmic reconfiguration combined with the standing that TripAdvisor has established in the sector over the years gave him the opportunity to manipulate perception about this establishment without changing anything in his business offering.

In case hoteliers try to manipulate the system by publishing fake positive or negative reviews about their competitors, a combination of algorithmic and organizational processes occur to manage the status of the content posted. A warning badge (see Figure 20) is listed next to the hotel's picture and score serving as a penalty to those who do not comply with the rules of the game. "The vast majority of hoteliers understand the risk to their business and reputation if they attempt to post fraudulent information to TripAdvisor", says a TripAdvisor's spokesman.

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**Figure 20** Warning badge indicating suspicious postings

Whereas some fraudulent reviews activate alarms, others inevitably escape the

algorithm and evade penalties. For example, a journalist at *The Times* newspaper who set out to assess the robustness of TripAdvisor's practices<sup>18</sup> was able to post six "glowing" fake reviews about hotels considered among the worst in London. Despite having never stayed at these hotels, he was able to post fake reviews that easily slid through the algorithmic checks. Another reporter at *The Telegraph*<sup>19</sup> tested TripAdvisor's claim that their use of algorithms and content management meant that all of its reviews are moderated. In the article that followed he challenged readers to:

"Log on to [TripAdvisor's] website and type the words "racist" or "racism" into the search engine and you might be surprised by what you find: together they crop up more than 2,300 times in reviews. "Pervert/perverted" features in 353 reviews, "homophobic/homophobia" in 295, "rapist" in 33, and "paedophile" in 10. Often these defamatory terms are used to describe hotel or restaurant staff, B&B owners, waiters and receptionists... TripAdvisor is also awash with references to food poisoning (10,951), bed bugs (31,429), assault (1,064) and theft (7,554) – accusations that leave an indelible stain on the establishment concerned, but which can be made without a shred of evidence. Reviews are the words of "trusted members of the travel community", according to TripAdvisor – and yet no checks are made on the identity of the people who post them and no proof of stay is needed".

At the other end of the spectrum, hotel managers can associate their official website with their listing on TripAdvisor by adding links to it or badges demonstrating how well they are doing (see Figure 21). These reputational signposts resemble the silver and gold awards that Visit England offers to the members who exceed expectations. On TripAdvisor these can be easily embedded from the owner center to the official webpages at no cost. In case they choose to include them, hoteliers rush to inform the traveller audience that TripAdvisor has rated them number one in their region, as if they have won the gold medal in a competition organized by a definitive authority.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/travel/news/article1831095.ece>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/hotels/8050127/Tripadvisor-reviews-can-we-trust-them.html>

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**Figure 21 Badges that hoteliers can embed on their official websites**

There is also the option of adding a dynamic widget which echoes the ranking given by TripAdvisor in a chronological order (most recent on the top). As reported, some attempts have been made by hoteliers to deceive which reviews appear from TripAdvisor on their website with the use of a program called FilterStream. In September 2009 more information about the functionality of the software became public. The idea of this feature was to ensure that only favourable reviews would be displayed in the official website. Soon after blogs started discussing about it and its impact, the widget became unavailable, along with the promotional YouTube video and any association with TripAdvisor.

Finally, to draw a parallel with the guest cards mentioned above as a management tool for hoteliers to receive feedback, TripAdvisor has designed guest cards that hoteliers can print out and physically distribute among guests (see Figure 22). 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.

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**Figure 22 TA guest card**

As a multi-sided phenomenon, TripAdvisor has been for hoteliers a management tool, a direct evaluation mechanism and an alert mechanism saying that action has to be taken. Once upon a time if a hotel managed to get into Lonely Planet's guidebooks that was an achievement. Yet a top position in a travel guide was not a

guarantee of quality given the time lag between inspections and the publications (among other factors). Managers cannot anymore exclusively rely on such achievements, especially when constant reevaluations on TripAdvisor tend to reveal more information about their current standing. Egerton House Hotel was number one hotel in London in July 2009, and in February 2010 became number 14, while it was number 3 as of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 2011 and number 5 as of the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 2012. (I encourage the reader to check it at the time you read through these lines). Such and more drastic changes in rankings have an impact on booking rates. All managers interviewed in TripAdvisor London and Boston noted this tendency. 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 comments on the impact of reviews:

“We have studies that we’ve taken from Forrester and various other analysts, 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 called Hays and Jarvis 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”.

Social media 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.

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 favourable. He has even created an Excel spreadsheet (see Figure 23) where he and his team input every single review and filter them according to themes that appear in reviews (breakfast,

sleeping quality, swimming etc.). This emergent creation of important categories comes as an interesting evolution of the prespecified categories used by formal accreditation schemes or SERVQUAL. 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 TA, 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 1/3<sup>rd</sup> 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 that began the dynamic process of Trip Advisor participation. We realize that in effect, our Management responses will not really affect the actual guest who commented, but rather provide “responsibility” and response for potential future guests”.

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Figure 23 Excel Spreadsheet, as produced by a hotel manager in Mexico

FECHA						
19 Enero 2008	OVERALL:	Rooms:	Service:	Value:	Cleanliness:	Pool:
	<b>Overall</b> 4	3.5	4.5	4.0	4.0	4.5
Promedio	77.60%					

Value      Rooms      Location      Cleanliness      Check In/FID      Service      Business Serv

Figure 24 Total score on TA, as rated by users

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 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 in order to address it. 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 number ever since then it drops back and I can tell you that this is reflected in occupancies too".

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. 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 then delivering and sell experience".

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" (TA Sales Director).

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, as will see in a following chapter. The final section of this chapter looks at the phenomenon of TripAdvisor from the standpoint of the users who in adapting their practice of travelling have become reputation-makers and breakers.

#### 4.5 Travellers' engagement with the phenomenon of TripAdvisor

The last section of the empirical chapter presents the perspective of users/ travellers who through their practice of travelling make reputations and give contemporary reputation-making its circular momentum. Looking at the formation of expectations, the engagements with destinations and hotels visited and the translation of TripAdvisor into the travel practice, we sketch an illustrative picture of the phenomenon of TripAdvisor after having considered multiple interest groups (i.e hoteliers, bloggers, TA executives etc.).

The study uncovered the critical role of TripAdvisor during different stages of travelling. Some travellers say they do not go on a trip or visit anywhere without checking TA first. They even go on to add that UGC has served as a lifejacket: "Trip Advisor saved me from staying at a hotel in a bad location in Lisbon", says a user of TA in one of our online interactions. Another user notes,

"I don't have to go blindly on a trip. I can know just about everything I need to know or choose to know before I book".

This introduces the kind of knowledge available on UGC and TripAdvisor in particular. Travellers of all ages get educated about what to expect to know and what kind of information is relevant to them in a similar way they were educated about what to expect from a reflective autobiographical travelogue. One traveller in one of the Facebook groups about TripAdvisor said about the nature of content that can be found on TripAdvisor but not in official travel guides:

"That restaurant is great is not enough info. Do they give senior discounts? Can we wear jeans? Do they have high chairs? Would I look weird if I was eating alone? Is it a romantic place? Every sub-group has their own list of requirements. Very dynamic".

Similarly another user commented with humour about what travel guides fail to do in his opinion:

"Because the travel books give one short perspective watered down to a short sentence that is often filled with ridiculous and useless comments like my personal favorite "the hotel lacked soul" now what the h\*\*\* is THAT supposed to mean? Turned out it meant the staff were rude and tried their best to rip you off, the rooms were dirty and there was no hot water. Hmm-why couldn't they have just said that?

UGC and TripAdvisor have therefore introduced a form of knowledge that we will further discuss in the subsequent chapters: a kind of knowledge that speaks to like-minded people and has fuelled the introduction of new practices in the daily routines of hotel managers.

“The reviews focus on things that matter to regular people - like is the hotel frequented by party animals who might be making too much noise when you are putting your kids to bed, or frequented by families who have kids who are running the halls at 7 a.m.”, wrote a user in an exchange with the researcher.

Similarly another user elaborates on what UGC offers in terms of expectations and knowledge about places:

“...Third, and this is just as important as ratings, the reviews give you details about the accommodations that you just don't get in short, summary reviews in AAA books or travel books. You might find out that there is a great bagel shop just 1/4 mile from the motel. Or that the hotel has tennis courts, and will lend you rackets. Or that during ski season, a particular resort hotel is a singles haven, but that it's great for families in the summer”.

Seeing through other sets of eyes creates different expectations and in a way changes what has been seen in the past or what would have been seen through an individual lens in a similar situation. Travellers in the study have talked about cases when they changed their minds of places that they already knew or had visited themselves in the past.

“I stayed at a Best Western in Atlantic City, and Holiday Inns in Los Angeles and Montreal back in the late 70's and the early 80's, and I didn't have any problems then. The rooms were neat and clean and the service was just great. I am planning a fourth visit to Los Angeles in the next year or two, and I have always said that I wanted to stay at the Holiday Inn in Santa Monica, where I stayed for my 21st birthday back in 1978. However, after reading the reviews of some of the people who have stayed there more recently, I'm not so sure”, confesses a puzzled traveller.

“I did a walking food tour of Greenwich village and Soho the last time I was in New York. I followed the advice of a local expert and I am sure glad I did because it was one of the more fun things I did in New York...and I have been to the city 14 times”! (user of TA published on Helium.com)

And the user continues her confession about how seeing through others' eyes changes the perspective in general and reputation in particular.

“Before I went to New York for the first time, I thought that the P\*\*\*\*\* hotel in front of Penn Station was a nice hotel! Anyone who has visited many hotels in New York are now laughing at me. Seeing pictures of this hotel and others, like the C\*\*\*\* hotel, make you thank to your knees Trip advisor”!

The General Manager of TripAdvisor emphasized from his perspective the difference between sources of travel knowledge:

“The feedback you get when online is always going to be different, when people put reviews on TripAdvisor they are talking to other travellers, they’ve got no other incentive to do it, they’ve got no other reason to do it. When someone is answering a survey card on British Airways or Eurostar or a hotel I’m not sure what my role is in that in terms of helping them run their business better. When I share information, I share with friends I share on places like TripAdvisor where it has an audience of other people that might benefit from my experience and that changes the way I write and what I talk about cause I’m not trying to complain to a business or even compliment a business, I’m trying to give kind of best information based on my experience to this audience from which I benefited many times based on their experiences, I think it’s a better quality of feedback than you get one to one with your customer if you ask them”.

The majority of users read reviews and occasionally contributes content back. However some loyal members of the community, who are usually destination experts, spend a considerable amount of time on the fora section. The Community and Forum specialists during the focus group in London describe one case where the constantly updating nature of UGC as opposed to printed traditional media has proven very informative for travellers:

“...It was on the English forum I think, its somebody who was going to stay in a hotel but it was a new hotel and they hadn’t finished building it yet and they were on the forum asking has anyone been there? Do you know is it finished? I’m going in 2 weeks time and I’m terrified I’m gonna turn up and it’s a building site and on the English site there was somebody who was living there who was going and taking photographs I think every day and putting up photographs of all the stages of the building, so that people would know whether their rooms were built yet which is so brilliant to have where you can actually see you can be reassured its built. I just thought it was fabulous” (TA focus group, Community and Forum specialists).

This case illustrates the aspect of “truth” that TripAdvisor aimed to convey through the motto: “Get the truth, then go!” This logo changes from time to time, for

example: in February 2010 it became “World’s most trusted travel advice” (at that moment their mascot, Ollie the owl, became smaller and possibly metaphorically less wise?); on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 2011 the tagline disappeared completely from the .com and co.uk websites, while the local ones had as a tagline “the largest travel community” instead.

The hotel General Manager in Mexico aptly sums up the relationship between reality and TripAdvisor: “One must realize that irrespective of what we may think is the “reality”, ... the reviewer has submitted their “reality”, and it is our goal to somehow close the *gap* if any between our intended reality and the guests perceived reality”. In other words hoteliers are asked to follow organizational routines bearing in mind the transparency that UGC has carried along.

For many of the users that participated in the study, TripAdvisor’s promised “truth” is translated into useful and accurate information about places (hotels, restaurants, destinations).

“It means to find out what a place is really like by communicating and reading about people who actually travel to the destination”, says a user of TripAdvisor who wrote an article about it on the Helium community.

In some cases travellers have “discovered” places because of reviews on TripAdvisor or they change their decisions about visiting a place:

“Gotten lots of good tips on nice hotels through TripAdvisor. Found hotels I would never have found in other ways”.

“I think that Internet has changed the choices we make and the cities we visit”.

Besides the choices we make, users feel empowered to change the perceptions about places by contributing to the medium of UGC. Although the quotation that follows comes from a destination expert who contributes to the fora, similar implications hold for the reviews section. She says:

“My own town gets a very bad press. There are serious misconceptions that it is a dangerous city and that there are no viable attractions. I contribute to correct such negative and damaging stereotypes and to encourage people to visit my wonderful city”.

In the quotation above, the contributor is hoping to change the way that a place – her

home town – is experienced by actively managing visitor expectations. Could the same process be extended to a hotel? Could so called “course corrections” made by reviewers who context prior reviews and other sources of information about a hotel change the way that a future guest experiences a hotel? The evidence in this study suggest that users certainly seem to be aware of the need to negotiate multiple accounts of a hotel:

“You read a description of a hotel on its site or other sites that are commercially linked to it and it sounds like the Garden of Eden. You check on user-generated websites and the place is a dump. Commercial sites cannot be trusted to be unbiased and objective. That can’t be or they are out of business. People always trust word of mouth endorsements a great deal. If someone tells me the new restaurant down the street is great...I will probably go and try it”.

Shaping expectations before embarking on the trip and then sharing experiences with fellow travellers has been considered a crucial section of the travel practice and the experience of places (again hotels are also included). An active user on TripAdvisor characteristically says:

“My friends joke that I gain such pleasure from planning vacations that the actual trip is anticlimactic”.

Another user who participated in the study is supportive of this broad definition of the travel experience:

“Travel Experience means everything from planning to memories long after the actual event. At the moment, I’m preparing for a Fear of Flying Course. I’m doing hypnosis, I’m learning to relax. This, for me, is all part of a travel experience. I am travelling across the country to do this flying course and will be staying in a hotel for two nights. And even planning my holidays this year, looking at maps, researching trips, these are all part of the experience”.

By the same token contributing to TripAdvisor creates some engagement with the website of TripAdvisor in the first place and the places hosted on it. For instance it is remarkable that even submitting a trivial comment about a small restaurant, besides making users feel expert on gastronomy, make them part of a chain with ‘visible’ components. Contributors receive follow up emails from TripAdvisors with statistics about how many read their reviews, where the people that have read the reviews come from, how many clicked on the like button all of which has direct implications for the degree of influence they might have with regards to decisions and bookings

(see Figure 25). At the other end of the spectrum readers that have not physically been to the restaurant can still ‘taste’ the meat, ‘smell’ the sauce and ‘listen’ to the lounge music playing in the background. They experience the space through reading other’s reviews and the contributors relive the experience through writing.

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**Figure 25 Extracts from email sent by TA showing the impact of user’s contributions (personal)**

In the following chapter we will return to our research question and examine what the empirical material presented here demonstrates about reputation-making. The table below summarizes the corpus of data that is going to be used in the analysis. Essentially all interest groups are involved to uncover the transformations in reputation-making and the practice of travelling. Having looked at different sources of giving feedback (travelogues, guest cards, UGC) and thus tools to translate it into business practices, we will now turn to the first part of the analysis in which we look at the changes and their impact more closely. Then the discussion continues with examples of reputationally sensitive cases some of which are described above, whereby verification mechanisms are at stake and have existential consequences for organizations. As hoteliers develop new practices, so too travellers engage with the places they visit in new ways as we will see in chapter 5 and this in turn influences

how reputation-making is performed. Table 15 summarizes the corpus of data that will be used in the Analysis.

### Corpus of data that will be presented in the Analysis Section

Source (who)	Content of data (what)	Purpose (why)
<i>Chapter 5</i>		
User/Traveller	Reviews of the same place published by different users	Multiplicity in how spaces are experienced
User/Traveller	Account on how TA members organized their travel in a city with people from the community.	
User/Traveller	Accounts on the travel experience	Users' perspective on travelling
User/Traveller	Review taking place at the hotel's lobby	How reputations unfold in different spaces
<i>Chapter 6</i>		
Hoteliers	What reputation <i>is/becomes</i>	To grasp hoteliers' perspective about reputation-making.
Hotel managers	Account on profiling techniques used to monitor what is being said	Studying the everyday practices
Hotel managers	Opinions about how reputation has changed	To grasp hoteliers' perspective about reputation-making.
User/Traveller	Review about what a delightful experience means to them	Users' perspective on experience and expectation.
User/Traveller	Reviews on getting information about known places/ degree of surprise	Data that will help us understand how information is acquired online.
User/Traveller	Review on disappointment due to different treatment compared to other users (no free upgrade)	Users' perspective on experience and expectation.
User/Traveller	Accounts on the differences between guide books and UGC websites	Is UGC yet another medium?
TA Sales Director	Advice to hoteliers on reputation management/ How TA views the phenomenon	TA's perspective on how reputation-making has been transformed
TA Sales Director/	Accounts on the impact reviews had on booking rates for hotels	

TA Director of communication		
Hostel owner	Account on the impact that reviews had on booking rates for hostels	Relationship between reputation-making and performance
Hotel manager	Account on how they used reviews to improve service	Studying the everyday practices

*Chapter 7*

Hotel Manager	Story about being unaware of the existence on TA	Focusing on the lack of control/ TA not as a further medium from a palette they can choose from
User/Traveller	Reviews creating reputation damage	Relationship between reputation-making and performance
Hoteliers	Accounts on how reviews can devastate small businesses	
Hotel Manager	Dialogue (Review and management response) that counterposes official authorities and TA user's claims	Where legitimacy and illegitimacy seem to be walking hand in hand
Hotel Manager	Hoteliers doing detective work to trace who published what review	Studying the everyday practices
KwikChex, Reputation Management Company	Accounts of their position and actions taken on behalf of their clients –hoteliers-.	What the response was? How did hoteliers defend their reputation?

**Table 15 Corpus of data that will be used in the analysis**

## **Part III**

### **Analysis Section**

## Chapter 5 Place-Making and the Performativity of Travel Practices: *Where* is reputation-making enacted?

### 5.1 Introduction

"Place is one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled that one can never shut the lid" (Hayden 1997: p.112).

The notion of place opens up the discussion and analysis. We may wonder how place affects the practices of reputation-making and what its role in the study is. With the help of the notion of place, in this first analysis chapter we will establish a common ground for understanding *formative* reputation and will discuss the implications for the literature and practice of reputation-making. In this chapter we take forward the theoretical discussion on Practice and Process theory and actively engage with the notion of performativity. In particular we demonstrate how thinking through becoming as opposed to the Cartesian logic makes a difference in the context of reputation-making practices and we use place as a powerful illustrative example that illustrates the key foundation of becoming. In claiming that places become meaningful only in and through practices, we understand them as open instances in the making and not as static territories. Drawing primarily on theorists of space, we treat places as sites of becoming that are performed through everyday practices (Thrift 1996) and appreciate their temporality (Massey 2005). This framing is enlightening with regards to reputation-making in two ways: First, it helps us realize that online and physical places do not ontologically preexist as two separate entities, but are rather co-constitutive of the same place that is enacted differently. Through this realization we also gain a more insightful understanding of reputation as always in relation to the practices that make it or break it in the moment, which is the focus of the subsequent chapters.

Places are fundamental to our existence and evolution, either we want to treat them as the 'where' life takes place or as part of life itself. Part of the aim of this chapter is to problematize the notion of place and to contemplate how it is created and preserved once enacted. In so doing we will be able to allude to a deeper understanding of the 'becoming' of a place and to explore the relationship between reputation-making and placeness. In the everyday, we largely take place for granted.

However, as Tuan (1977: p.3) notes, it “may assume unexpected meanings and raise questions we have not thought to ask”. The notion of place will help us erase the Cartesian line between physical practices and their performative enactment. The departure point to achieve this is to realize the difference between thinking of places as empty containers (thus spaces) and as places for- that have acquired meaning because they are enacted, a critical difference that we will come back to.

In section 2.7.4 we introduced the ideas of performing and enacting places. We illustrated their multiplicity and openness through the examples of the community drop-in centre in New Zealand and the process of mapping, which both helped us to understand the above difference. It is through engaging with the practices we choose to relate to the place that allows us to talk about the constitution of the place and therefore the becoming of places (place-making). In the travel sector, the practice of listing hotels, restaurants and destinations on TripAdvisor and other UGC websites affords an interesting opportunity to examine the nuances of where reputation-making takes place and how it is performed differently or not - due to the unique configurations of placeness. In so doing, and by juxtaposing traditional enactments of reputation-making and UGC, we will discuss how the experience of place has been transformed and how this has fuelled a series of further revisions to reputation-making.

Before we enter into our discussion of place-making and its relationship to reputation-making, we first need to grasp the multiplicity that characterizes performing a place through travelling. The following story is based on an interview with a hotel manager (slightly modified for the purpose of presentation): Imagine a couple organizing their honeymoon in Paris. They research every single detail about the city, the hotel, the particular room advertised on the website as the “wedding suite”, they ask friends and they read reviews online. In a way, they start experiencing the place before embarking on the journey. As Urry in his tourist gaze maintains, “satisfaction stems from anticipation, from imaginary pleasure seeking” (2002: p.13). They finally arrive in Paris, they are having an amazing week in the romantic city and while checking out at the lobby area of the hotel one of their backpacks gets stolen. The general manager of the hotel is immediately asked to come down to the lobby to take care of the situation. An investigation takes place without success and the couple is advised to report the incident to the nearest police

station. After three days have passed, the general manager receives the following email from the guest:

“Hello,  
I have not heard anything about the luggage that was stolen from your Hotel when I was there with my wife. The luggage was as following:  
Swiss backpack  
\*\*\*\* Laptop  
Charge cord set  
DVDs  
Books  
Financial papers”.

The manager replies back that it is their responsibility to report the incident to the police:

Dear \*\*\*,

We have looked all areas nearby immediately after the mentioned theft and we did not find anything. We have contacted the group leader of the group that was departing that time and it was confirmed that no luggage was mixed up. Moreover, there was no one who saw anyone suspicious near your luggage.

The police require you to personally report the incident.  
Unfortunately we cannot do anything else from our side.

The online email exchange between the guest and the general manager escalates to the point where the guest demands compensation for the lost luggage. The manager reasserts his position that the hotel does not hold any responsibility for the loss and reminds the former guest that insurance companies require any incident to be reported to the police. Just when the conversation seems to have reached an impasse, it takes an unexpected turn and the guest blackmails the manager with a negative review:

Mr. Manager,

You are right, I did not have time to get to the police - at the time I was more concerned with catching my flight. I am sorry to hear that you do not have any responsibility. I guess I will not bear any responsibility when I go to web sites and provide reviews that your hotel does not assume any responsibility for stolen items. I have never written a review before but you seem to be encouraging me to just that.

If I do it, you will not like it! Your choice.

Two weeks later, the review appears online on TripAdvisor with a one star rating out

of five and the following story:

“Robbed in the lobby area while checking out”

### **REVIEW REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT**

The above story involves multiple spatial arrangements of the hotel and its resolution activates different practices of reputation-making. From a Cartesian perspective that treats spaces as geographic containers, we would trace the process of reputation-making as if it were a procedure with identifiable stages. We would then say that in the case above it started within the building, in the lobby area of the hotel, then transferred to the Internet through the private exchange of emails between the guest/traveller and the general manager. Then, we would say that a re-representation of the lobby (the manager/guest interaction) was manifested online through the review posted on TripAdvisor. However, having adopted a process perspective and with the use of practice theory and performativity, we understand the hotel as the same place which is enacted in multiple ways. The new ways of practicing the travel experience have reconfigured the practice of reputation-making and have redefined our familiar world. Hence, we will claim that a separation between offline and online, between physical territories and their online manifestations would be a misleading bifurcation against the core principles of this study. The two interrelated enactments –which are actually one and not two- are –or is- a co-constitutive whole that becomes a place for negotiating reputation, a place for entertainment, a place for sharing, -for imagining trips and destinations and in general a place that becomes in infinite ways. This infinite variety of becoming a place for- that has been informed since the emergence of UGC has in turn propelled us to emphasize the enactment of placeness as integral of contemporary reputation-making.

In what follows we deconstruct the becoming of a ‘place’ as an unfolding process that influences reputation-making through the ways in which travelling is enacted as a performance. The remaining chapter is organized as follows. First we will discuss

the tension between space and place to set out the working definition of “place” in this study. As we progress, it will become clear that when we use the term place we not only mean destinations, but are referring to the way in which hotels unfold as places that exist somewhere on the map *and* online when people produce UGC about them. The emphasis here is placed on the sameness of the two, which is difficult to grasp without making first the separation. But the reader will remember how Whitehead and process philosophers have identified the inescapable difficulty in attributing new definitions to our old notions and perceptions. We should abandon the dichotomy between the printed map and its physical representation and instead think of the place as momentarily created once we read the map, or once we enter the lobby or we write a review about it online. It is the same place enacted differently; from a process perspective places are constantly becoming and therefore defined by their moving nature. Not only are travellers’ experiences open and available for contestation, but so too are the places that they visit. The chapter concludes by considering places as articulated moments, as processes of on-going (re-)construction during which reputation-making is in a process of becoming.

## 5.2 Spatiality and Placeness

One of the challenges facing cultural geographers and other researchers studying any kind of “territories” was to draw the line between space and place, a distinction we particularly emphasize here, as it is indicative of the differences between the Cartesian approach and the lens of becoming. Although often both words are used interchangeably, there are some distinctions to be noted. The majority of researchers conceptualizes space as more abstract and generic, whereas place is realized when it acquires personal meaning for people who relate to it and this transforms it from space to place. Tuan also treats the two concepts in a similar way: “Space is more abstract than place. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (2001: p.6). Auge suggests the event as necessary to experience place as opposed to space, “the term space is more abstract in itself than the term place, whose usage at least refers to an event (which has taken place), a myth (said to have taken place), or a history (high places)” (1995: p.83). Space is empty and undifferentiated, whereas place is always localized and relationally intimate.

The academic literature in this area is dominated by two traditions (reflecting the ontology of being and the Cartesian approach and a more relational view). On the one hand space has been treated as a fixed territory, distinct from action; as "a container with pre-given attributes frozen in time" (Dodge and Kitchin 2005). On the other hand the relational approach acknowledges the dynamic nature of places, whereby places emerge in and through practice. According to the second stream, "places are like ships, moving around and not necessarily staying in one location" (Sheller and Urry 2004), defined through interrelationships between people and "stuff in motion", known also as the mobility paradigm (see also Sheller and Urry 2006). In this vein Doel (2000: p.125) suggests that we should approach space as a verb rather than a noun, "spacing is an action, an event, a way of being". The chapter draws on the relational paradigm which holds considerable sympathy with Process Theory and becoming and aims to interpret place-making through all the instantiations of practicing travel that transcend the physical-online duality. As we will go on to show, places become where and when instances of travelling are enacted (in the lobby, online, through magazines, in the imagination), it is the practice of travelling that allows us to imply them all at once and still refer to the same place.

The definition of places differs from an *a priori* discovery of a virgin territory like Columbus' discovery of America. Taylor (1999) refers to place as the everyday encounter which becomes routinized, as opposed to the discovery of the unknown. Place is distinctive for Taylor (1999) and "constituted by our everyday behaviour, by routinized movement rather than the movement of the explorer or pioneer who searches the spatial unknown". This "routinized movement" reminds us of Feldman's (2002)'emergent accomplishments' and Butler's (1993) recitation and repetition through which gender is performatively produced. Indeed we claim that the performativity of place-making and the generative mechanism of Process Theory are theoretically sympathetic and as we will aim to show, have profound implications for reputation-making and the practice of travelling.

In our analysis we will use the term place, based on the assumption that it has passed through the notion of space and achieved a *relational intimacy* in practice. This is in line with Auge's idea that "the space could be to the place what the word becomes when it is spoken: grasped in the ambiguity of being accomplished, changed into a

term stemming from multiple conventions, uttered as the act of one present (or one time), and modified by the transformation resulting from successive influences" (1995: p.80). Spaces on their way to 'places for-' are articulated and performed by being photographed and touristically consumed, or by being admired in personal travellers' diaries and blogs or through daily mass media consumption in magazines, Internet and advertisements or through a sea pebble secretly taken to be kept as a souvenir. If we go back to the roots of tourism and to the first attempts to keep the place alive, we will observe how travelling and its performance takes a different shape over the years and how it is evolving in relation to travellers' needs and habits: an important observation if we aim to understand the transformations in reputation-making in the travel sector.

The practice of the Grand Tour can probably be regarded as "the first extensive tourist movement" (Towner 1985) and the first significant accumulation of written 'know how' about travel through: diaries, road books, maps, contemporary magazines, journals and letters. Young people embarked on the journey primarily to expand their educational horizons and to prepare themselves for prominent positions in society. Between 1661 and 1763 Grand tourists kept diaries in the format of travelogues with information about the itinerary, the length of stay in centers, the total length of the tour, the method of transport, accommodation used and impressions of the areas visited (Towner 1985). Eventually the Grand Tour evolved into what is known as tourism (Brodsky-Porges 1981).

This habit of permanently marking the experience by keeping notes in a diary or by taking pictures and videos has continued. Adler (1989) reminds us of the act of marking travel experiences:

"[a]lthough the art of travel centers on the imaginative construction of encounters and passages, it has always included means by which fleeting experiences could be permanently marked or inscribed. Some marks such as graffiti may be left in the place of passage while others (albums, journals, curios, and gifts) testify in the home world to the traveler's passage".

The tendency to pause time and space in an effort to carry it home became very intensive and as Urry (1999: p.78) notes "in some cases the process of collection comes to dominate the process of travel". We could romantically say that travel

virtual communities simply transform the way this need is accommodated but not the habit per se.

Going back to the dynamic relationships between expectations while travelling and learning, it seems appropriate to mention the existence of “vetturino” as the tour guides of the Grand Tour era who “guaranteed transport of the student's party and luggage, with pre-determined routing and scheduled stops” (Brodsky-Porges 1981). The vetturino existed alongside “bear leaders” who served as mentors accompanying young students on their journeys. “Vetturinos” and “bear leaders” have not completely disappeared. They do not have to physically travel nowadays along with the travellers, but they have reappeared as users who conveniently share their knowledge and experiences in travel virtual communities and fora. This serves as a brief review of how the practice of travelling has evolved (See Appendix B for a more detailed analysis). In what follows, we will more closely look at how the practice of travelling is bound up with place-making and reputation-making.

### **5.3 The practice of travelling as an illustrative example of place-making**

As we saw, places are enacted while practicing them in infinite ways and combinations. When travellers (from Grand Tourists to modern travellers) share their experience of travelling they not only refer back to the place as it *was* as if it stopped becoming when they physically left it, but they keep making the place. If we follow the formative nature of reputation-making through and assume that place is made manifest through practices and their momentary instantiations, then even an encounter with the same place in different points in time result in different enactments of reputation.

The articulation of place-making undergoes a further, interesting transformation when considered in relation to reputation-making. Later in this thesis we will discuss how the different enactment of travelling through UGC has disrupted the hospitality industry, an important part of which is the configurations of place. The number of users ‘checking in’ online with the use of their smartphones has been increasing dramatically. On sites like Foursquare and Gowalla people announce publicly within their networks of friends where they are; the location may be a hotel, or bar or restaurant or airport or city. These statistics as created by users transform the

popularity of the place and serve as an extension of its physical placeness. We have to understand though that it is the same place. In the context of this thesis, it is suggested that the reviews become co-constitutive of this multiple identity of the same place. Reputation managers are thus compelled to adapt their practices accordingly and incorporate an appreciation of this multiplicity in their strategies.

By embracing this multiplicity we achieve a revised understanding of place as at once whole and multiple in practice and we give further meaning to our reconfiguration of the tourist gaze. John Urry (1990) introduces the notion of the tourist gaze to theoretically frame the touristic experiences travellers gain while encountering sights, nature, buildings. Examples of the object of the tourist gaze include “a landscape (Lake District), a townscape (Chester), an ethnic group (Maoris in Rotorua, New Zealand), a lifestyle (the wild west), historical artefacts (Canterbury Cathedral or Wigan Pier), bases of recreation (golf courses at St. Andrews), or simply sun, sand and sea (Majorca) (Urry 2002: p.51). The touristic gaze reminds us of what Haraway (1991: p.191) notes about eyes being “active perceptual systems, building in translation and in specific ways of seeing, that is ways of life”, or if we paraphrase her, that is ways of *travelling*. In the second edition (in 2002) Urry discusses how mobility and new technologies have advanced the practice of gazing. In this direction he introduces new types of the tourist gaze (the romantic tourist gaze, collective, spectatorial, reverential, anthropological, environmental, mediated). In this study we are particularly interested in the mediated gaze, as yet another way of practicing the travel experience.

In other words, travellers explore places, gaze at them, inhabit them temporarily, interact with their constitutive relations: people, buildings, nature, culture etc.- and as they practice places, they recreate them in interesting ways. Through the lens of process the travellers revise and refresh places and contribute to their becoming. This study therefore perceives place as an open process, always becoming and performed in action; an argument that will be further deconstructed as the chapter unfolds.

The production and reproduction of place in which somewhere is unfamiliar one moment and then becomes familiar the next through relational intimacy and its implications for reputation-making is at the core of this chapter. In this sense places that manifest on TripAdvisor and travel social media are “open places” and

undifferentiated from their physical manifestations. What we propose comes in conflict with a view that on the one hand would appreciate their physical existence somewhere in the world and on the other their existence through user-generated postings in personal narrative, images, video, and rankings. By the end of this chapter we should have managed to show that the two (physical and online) are not ontologically separate (preexist) nor do they only become entangled and interrelated under certain circumstances, but they are always already in relation; they are different ways of practicing the same place.

#### **5.4 The becoming of places**

Places are in a state of becoming. A conflicting claim would be hard to sustain; for example, it would be hard to assert that places remain stable or that they ever stop changing. However, while it is self-evident to say that landscapes change as time passes by, it is quite different to say that places 'become' in an ongoing process of production and reproduction. As Massey puts it "we are constantly making and remaking the time-spaces through which we live our lives" (1999: p.23). The aim of this section is to elucidate what we mean by place-making and how this becomes relevant in the context of study.

It is of importance here to emphasize the emerging nature of place as "a practice, a doing, an event, a becoming—a material and social reality forever (re)created in the moment" (Dodge and Kitchin 2005). It is suggested that we can draw upon this conceptualization to support our understanding of place-making occurring during practicing places on UGC websites. As incoming information is shared online, the places are reconfigured through algorithmic mechanisms and reputations are enacted in ways that have the potential to further transform another interrelated enactment of places, which is our visit to them.

In the introduction, we differentiated between the colloquial use of space as an empty container and place as part of moving life. We emphasized that what has meaning is place, which is always place for- something. Thrift (1996: p.47) puts it very succinctly: "In practice, all space is anthropological, all space is practiced, all space is place". Thrift's position then presents place as a site of becoming that has to be constantly performed through everyday practices (*ibid*). Among these practices we

include the practices of travelling and of reputation-making. Practices do not happen in places but along with them, they are co-constitutive. For example a hotel as a ‘thing’ in a territory does not mean much, until travellers visit it, take pictures of it, experience its service, interact with the staff and most recently write about it on the Internet. What place means, is perpetually negotiated, as with every phenomenon in a state of becoming. Simonsen notes that “places are meeting points, moments or conjunctures, where social practices and trajectories, spatial narratives and moving or fixed materialities meet up and form configurations that are continuously under transformation and negotiation” (2008: p.22). With the emergence of UGC the places these negotiations occur are enacted differently –as we also see in the examples throughout the thesis-. What place becomes at any one time is produced through its constitutive relations.

This leads us to interpret how places are performed differently. In the examples that follow a Latin American and a Londoner who visited the same hotel, narrate how they enacted the place, which is yet another enactment of the travel experience and the place. That people enact the same place differently suggests nothing new as long as subjectivity is spatially constrained but when the place is not any more defined by its physical boundaries then the reconfigurations in reputation-making involved become noteworthy. To illustrate the point, below follow two reviews from users on TripAdvisor about the number one hotel in Santiago: one British and one Brazilian that have enacted the place differently and have potentially further created the place in their own ways.

**REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT**

Review published on TripAdvisor (British)

**REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT**

Review published on TripAdvisor (Brazilian)

The place and hence reputation-making as an interrelated process, has been performed differently in the above cases. The travellers have gazed at the same ‘sight/site’, yet then articulated this performance online differently and possibly played their role in how others formed decisions. If these reviews and the hundreds of others that appear in the list on TripAdvisor had not been written and published online, maybe fewer people would have visited the hotel and thus fewer or more would have contributed to its transformation through the encounters with the hotel as a place. Fewer or more would have walked through the entrance, would have gazed at the lobby, would have tried the cocktails at the bar.

Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) point out the *consequentiality* that everyday actions have, as one of practice theory’s principles (see section 2.5). What constitutes a practice is its performance which in turn reactivates the broader setting and conditions within which action takes place. The consequentiality suggested by practice theorists is conceptually close to generativity through process: as we discuss above, process is not the result of the interactions between actors and entities but reconstitutes them and brings them into existence. Just as practices are constitutive and in turn reproduce the social order in which they make sense, so in a similar way, places acquire meaning through their on-going (re-)constitution on TripAdvisor with

consequences for the place (hotel).

This perception of place-making develops the approach to reputation-making taken in this study. TripAdvisor as another enactment of the hotel as an open place, has absorbed the duality between physical and online. The tourist gaze has been practiced online with different outcomes for places. Dodge and Kitchin (2004) in their analysis of electronic and physical interrelationships between code and space emphasize the becoming nature:

"[c]ode/ space is constantly in a state of becoming, produced through individual performance and social interactions that are mediated, consciously or unconsciously, in relation to the mutual constitution of code/space. [T]he nature and production of code/space are never fixed, but shift with place, time, and context (for example, social, political, and economic)".

So it is with the travel stories above which echo this co-location across place and code as Dodge and Kitchen describe. In the following section, we turn our attention to places that are not only the background of action; we will attempt to move 'from things in place to the 'production of place, following Lefebvre's encouragement (1991).

## **5.5 Throwntogetherness: when diverse 'elements' are thrown together in places and transform them**

When we visit a place we recreate it: through our socialization with local people, through our interactions with buildings, sights and nature. Our mobilization contributes to the becoming of this place into something different. As Simonsen notes, "places are never finished, but always becoming- they are products of social relations and interactions, which are continuously constructed, laid down, decayed and reconstructed" (2008: p.15). In the process of recreation through enactments, all kinds of relationships are reconfigured: between humans and non-humans, ground and feet, human and nature. Gibson (2008) highlights the rearrangement of such relations in the context of tourism "where cultural barriers dissolve and identities are created and performed". In this thesis we argue that just as social relations can be rearranged and never reach any kind of closure so, in the same way, places are open to negotiation in order to be defined and experienced, especially if we treat them as

part of the becoming instead of the background setting or scene.

If place can be defined, recreated and negotiated through interactions and encounters, we can safely assume that combinations of people at different points of time offer variations of how the same place could be temporarily defined. This multiplicity that the becoming of places implies is explained through the notion of 'throwntogetherness'. When we are 'thrown together', we give shape to the place in particular ways that different combinations of people would not. It is therefore a generative process out of which places are temporarily created through what Baerenholdt and Granas (2008: p.2) call "non-predictable meetings that can be corporeal or virtual, if not also imaginative". We also become part of the 'here and now' which is reconfigured. For instance a couple after a critical fight for their relationship would treat the most idyllic and atmospheric place like an ugly prison. The notion of 'throwntogetherness' embraces the multiple factors that make people meet together and create places in this way and not another. The creation of places is relevant in our discussion, whereby TripAdvisor for instance does not only serve as a medium where comments, opinions and rumours are hosted, but also as a place in its own right, actually the same place we visit when we enter the lobby, yet differently enacted. The ways people, algorithms, discourses are arranged on TripAdvisor do create their own history rather than a depiction; no matter whether accurate, legitimate or unsubstantiated.

Massey (2005: pp.140-141) introduces the notion of 'throwntogetherness', "the way that very diverse elements that cross categories come together to foster a particular 'here and now'. This is what makes places specific – this gathering of diverse entities into relation". The here and now are important elements of place and our perception of it. Massey adds that "here is no more (and no less) than our encounter, and what is made of it. It is irretrievably here and now. It won't be the same here when it is no longer now" (2005: p.139). This close relationship of time and place is illustrative of the 'becoming' spectrum through which this study treats phenomena. The notion of throwntogetherness is employed in the study to show how reputation-making emerges through place-making in time. In other words how diverse 'elements', some of which are beyond our control or even knowledge (such as the TripAdvisor algorithms), come together they redefine temporary reputations and influence people's decision to visit a hotel or destination.

The interrelationship between code and place, between physical and online is not new. What is new and emanates from this study is how the becoming of this interrelationship as a process occurring in time has enriched reputation-making; what we have coined formative reputation. Formative reputation centers on the premise that is constitutive of different configurations (practices, people, processes, moods, places) and is built acknowledging that the multiple enactments of reputation are always in a process of becoming. We cannot talk about reputation as an entity as such but always in relation to practicing reputation: in this vein we can talk about reputation-making, -breaking, or -taking. Formative reputation encapsulates this becoming inherent in our perception of reputation from Process and Practice lens. This is the chapter where we shed more light on this constitutive formation. In what follows next, we will attempt to ground this discussion in the context of travelling and revisit some illustrative data.

## 5.6 Travel- and place-making

Travellers occupy multiple categories including “consumers, translators, collectors, detectives – everyday cultural and political geographers (Crouch 2000) who try to make sense of the world” (in Gibson 2009). The practice of travelling results in a remaking of the places tourists pass through, either consciously or as an unintended consequence. These places are reconfigured as soon as different people walk through them and enrich them with other customs, ideas and in so doing modify the aura of the place.

If the reader has not yet transcended the dichotomies that differentiate places into online and physical, then the notion of throwntogetherness further elaborated in this section, will help towards coalescing both worlds into one and will make more clear that places are enacted when relations are actualized in 'here and now'. Being thrown together with other people makes places look, feel and become different. The ways a place is temporarily defined and the travel experience in broad are constituted by the constitutive ‘elements’ that happen to be there: the people, the culture and so forth. Participants in the study confirmed their experience of travelling as such:

"Travel means seeing, experiencing, and learning other parts of the world, as well as a break from ordinary daily routine life. I first got interested in travel when I was 13 and still going to school. My teacher

that year drew me a picture of the Eiffel Tower, and told me about the time that he went to Paris and had lunch right there on the Eiffel Tower. I also used to go to both the local public and school libraries and took books out about different countries, as well as National Geographic magazines", says a traveller and Destination Expert on TripAdvisor, in one of our online interactions.

Having lunch on the Eiffel Tower is a strong evocation; even the act of talking about it creates the place both for the narrator and the listener. While the place is being created, the desire to visit the romantic scene and become part of it becomes more intensive. Urry notes this preparatory part of the travel experience:

"Tourism necessarily involves daydreaming and anticipation of new or different experiences from those normally encountered in everyday life. But such daydreams are not autonomous; they involve working over advertising and other media generated sets of signs, many of which relate very clearly to complex processes of social emulation" (2002: p.14).

Planning to develop these thoughts later with the mediatized gaze, we suggest that in some extraordinary way, travelling is enacted when listening to the story. In the example given above, this travel and many more happened in the pages of National Geographic. After some time, she herself became part of the travel experience for other travellers when she wrote hundreds of reviews and forum posts on TripAdvisor.

The anticipatory and imaginative performance of travelling has been incorporated in the travel experience and fuelled a series of recognized outcomes for modern tourists. As discussed above, the mediated tourist gaze presupposes that tourists visit a place to experience what has been communicated through the media: to match the lived experience with the promised one via brochures, TV, magazines, the Internet. However when performed experience does not live up to expectations there are consequences. In extreme cases, such as "Paris Syndrome" tourists collapse and may suffer from a psychosomatic mental illness. This alarming turn of events became so notable among Asian tourists that "Paris Syndrome" now appears as a formal entry in medical journals. It is regarded as a severe case of what is commonly referred to as culture shock; during their visit to Paris individuals expect to experience the cosmos of "Amelie", "Louvre" or the "Luis Vuitton" lifestyle but instead find themselves assaulted by dissonant unromantic moments and rude conversations<sup>20</sup>. This

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<sup>20</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6197921.stm>

disappointment then manifests through symptoms such as dizziness, tachycardia, sweating etc. Similar psychoses have been reported in other highly evoked places, for example “Jerusalem Syndrome” in which travellers become psychotic and suffer from intense religiously related mental problems after arriving in the Holy City or “Florence Syndrome” (also known as the Stendhal syndrome), whereby tourists exposed to Florentine art cannot absorb their experiences and develop the symptoms described earlier. In this respect UGC has intensified this enactment of travelling that is evoked intensively before the feet perform the journey and instead of providing yet another promotion platform, it has remade the place where travelling occurs. As one user and destination expert on TA said by email:

"My life would be rather less complicated without TripAdvisor but it would also be less fulfilling".

This user and most of the respondents (travellers) are members who dedicate much of their time and self to creating images for fellow travellers and thus to creating and re-making places.

The touristic "way of seeing" (Urry's gaze) usually imbues places with specific meaning. Favero (2007) highlights the visual element of the gaze: "the tourist, while invoking other sensorial experiences too, primarily collects visual stimuli (landscapes, panoramas, faces, photographs, etc.)". Even though the visual encounter has been transferred into the virtual environment (see Urry 2000 chapter 3) the discussion has been limited to the context of media as alternatives to face-to-face communication, partially because the time of publication was well before the invention of social media and UGC. The development of social media has encouraged us to talk about the generative mechanism of making places beyond seeing or flying – through different enactments such as imaging, imagining, reading, writing. Travellers of modern age contextualize the landscape using their own terms and performatively contribute to its (re-)creation.

The concept of a city is bound up with symbols (“global icons” in Urry's terms) that epitomize its existence and history. For example Athens is associated with Acropolis, Paris with Eiffel Tower, London with Big Ben. Beyond this first touristic level, cities are synthesized when travellers experience, enact and convey them. This synthesis emanates as different ‘elements’ are thrown together. Massey's London, indeed all

places, are "open to the wider world, as articulations of a multitude of trajectories" (2007: p.172). As discussed above, a traveller wrote on an online community how the act of reading on TripAdvisor transformed her perception of New York, even though she had visited the place 14 times.

"I did a walking food tour of Greenwich village and Soho the last time I was in New York. I followed the advice of a local expert and I am sure glad I did because it was one of the more fun things I did in New York...and I have been to the city 14 times!"

A simple piece of advice from a local transformed her view of a very well-known city. She therefore rediscovered New York. Similar to this, another user reported how she felt when she read about places she knew and had visited in the past.

"I stayed at a B\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* in Atlantic City, and H\*\* I\*\* in Los Angeles and Montreal back in the late 70's and the early 80's, and I didn't have any problems then. The rooms were neat and clean and the service was just great. I am planning a fourth visit to Los Angeles in the next year or two, and I have always said that I wanted to stay at the H\*\* I\*\* in Santa Monica, where I stayed for my 21st birthday back in 1978. However, after reading the reviews of some of the people who have stayed there more recently, I'm not so sure. I just love Santa Monica: the cool ocean breezes, the beach, the stores. But I will have to check out these hotels again before I decide where to stay. From what I've heard, the more expensive hotels are the best places to stay".

In the examples above, the power of engaging with UGC is that the knowledge that we have about a place is creatively destroyed and in a generative, performative way this recreates the place itself, as we take a decision to visit it or not, to be thrown together with what we learn about it or not. In this chapter we draw parallels between the (re-)creation of reputations (and their making) and places as both are performed and performative.

So far we have attempted to establish the open nature of places and the principle that they can be recreated while enacted in multiple ways. One of these enactments happens when we talk about how we experienced place-making. We may not call it recreation, we may refer to it simply as travel enriched by other people, civilizations and tastes; as most travellers in the study also did. But through TripAdvisor we narrate, illustrate and demonstrate our experience of recreating the place we visited. Through this process "herenowness" is reconfigured and remade once again, while we articulate the experience loudly across time and space leveraging the scale and

scope of TripAdvisor's Internet presence. In other words, reputation-making happens ongoingly through this formative process.

One might respond at this stage that this has been the case with the TV, cinema or any other form of media. McQuire (1998: p.73) suggests about the mediated experiences that cinema and TV create: "it is not only seeing the real world differently, but of really seeing a different world". This dichotomy between the *real* world and its representation clearly has its roots in the Cartesian tradition, the same one that regards reputation as an intangible asset the organization possesses or as the image outsiders have about it. This dichotomy is sympathetic to the view that spaces are fixed territories and therefore the online dimension should be a representation of their real identity. This thesis has highlighted the performativity of process and the unique (re)creation of reputation and place in the moment. Other media can be performative too but as discussed, they mainly create unidirectional conceptual types of knowing. TripAdvisor introduces a different aspect of placeness and reinforces the generativity we have attached to the travel experience. Throughout this study we have mentioned differences between other travel discourses and online user-generated narratives on TripAdvisor. For instance, a traveller using online fora juxtaposes the escorted tour on a brochure to information acquired in a forum on TripAdvisor:

"You do have a general idea of what an escorted tour is like. If you do take one, you have to get up at the crack of dawn (5:30, 6, or 6:30 in the morning), have your bags outside your hotel room by a certain time, go down and eat breakfast, and then leave the hotel at a certain time. You have to stick with the group and you're on a strict time schedule. In Europe, there are centuries-old churches, castles, and palaces that you walk through, some with no elevators, as well as cobblestone streets. Even on some of the U.S., Canadian, and Mexican tours, you stay in lodges inside of the national parks, and there may be nature hikes where you walk across some rough terrain. In most destinations, especially in the major cities, you mainly get a two-night stay, which to me is not enough time to really absorb the culture of the area. And if I want to stick to a strict schedule and get up early in the morning, I would have simply stayed home and followed my routine. But if anybody is going to take an escorted tour, they should check out the Tour Tales section of the Trafalgar and Insight Vacations Message Board. They will tell you what an escorted tour is like: the brochures won't".

This is a vivid travel story, although not about hotels' reviews, it shows the directness of knowing through others' eyes, an impact that a travel book or brochure

would not have. Simonsen (2008: p.20) describes very nicely the power of travel stories, which go beyond supplementary resources and help people perform the travel before the official departure.

“Every story is a travel story- a spatial practice. ...these narrated adventures, simultaneously producing geographies of actions and drifting into the commonplaces of an order, do not merely constitute a supplement to pedestrian enunciation and rhetorics. They are not satisfied with displacing the latter and transposing them into the field of language. In reality they organize walks, they make the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it”.

Therefore there is a hidden power that leads opinions and shapes in which ways places will be further recreated by new visitors who will embark on a journey or in which ways a place will be remade exactly because they will not visit it in here and now. This discussion is further analysed in the next section.

### **5.7 Enacting travel in new unfamiliar ways**

"Digital living will include less and less dependence upon being in a specific place at a specific time, and the transmission of place itself will start to become possible. If I could really look out the electronic window of my living room in Boston and see the Alps, hear the cowbells, and smell the (digital) manure in summer, in a way I am very much in Switzerland".

Nicholas Negroponte (1995: p.165), Director of MIT Media Lab.

This quotation is indicative of how we treat places here; as spatial processes that can be reached not because we necessarily enter the plane, but because we dream of the exotic beach or because we read about the customs of the distant village. Imagination is thus encapsulated within (and overflows) practice while travelling is enacted in innumerable ways. Travellers can make the journey before or after the feet perform it. Travel is performed and enacted via storytelling, through narrating and listening, viewing and reviewing. The use of 'listening' in the context of UGC postings functions as a reifying metaphor. Ingold explains that “to read is not just to listen but to remember. If writing speaks it does so with the voices of the past, which the reader hears as though he were present in their midst” (2007: p.15). And he continues to illustrate the relationship between performing reading and travelling which is so relevant and takes place at the same time in this study.

“[T]he traveller inscribes the surface of the earth with his feet, they thought of these surfaces not as spaces to be surveyed but as regions to be inhabited. In reading as in storytelling and travelling, one remembers as one goes along. Thus the act of remembering was itself conceived as a performance. The text is remembered by reading it, the story by telling it, the journey by making it. Every text, story or trip in short is a journey made rather than an object found. And although with each journey one may cover the same ground, each is nevertheless an original movement” (Ingold 2007: p. 16).

Even though the same ground is covered by many travellers, each time we witness a unique (re-)creation. The performance or enactment of travelling takes place not only by making the journey but also by imagining it and by remembering it through its manifestations (text, images, video). The act of articulating such a performance reshapes the place or the 'thing' further. A hotel can be a place, a building, a thing among others or an “experience” as boutique and design hotels wish to claim. Another traveller and destination expert on TripAdvisor in one of our online interactions shared his sensing of travelling through reviewing and remembering:

..."[A]lso I travel vicariously through my contributions...someone asks...where can I have a nice lunch in Buenos Aires...I start thinking...hmmm...the Café Tortoni or Café Biela...and I am mentally back sitting outside at a table...drinking a café con leche and eating a Sandwich de Miga... The questions and answers help me relive good experiences and at time bad experiences".

The iconic travel through stories is a performance of (re-)creation too. Solnit (2001: p.72) notes that “to write is to carve a new path through the terrain of the imagination, or to point out new features on a familiar route. To read is to travel through that terrain with the author as guide...” This manifestation serves not as a separate place but bridges travellers of the world who are ‘thrown together’ in even more complicated combinations. What TripAdvisor achieves, is the production of combinations of people and relationships that would not emerge otherwise.

It should not come as a surprise that people spend hours posting reviews (text, images and videos) and helpful tips for fellow travellers online in review websites and on travel fora; some of them have posted over 70000 posts. Travellers below confess that travel indeed begins well before the feet perform it and finishes when and if they choose to; whenever they decide to stop thinking about it.

"Travel experience to me means that when my trip is over and done with ... how do I feel about it. Were there any negative surprises? Did it

meet my expectations? Was it pleasantly memorable? Did my family/friends have a good time? Was it within my budget? Would I return again? Would I talk positively about the experience? All or most of these factors would have to be positive for me to have a positive travel experience...otherwise I would not be happy", says a TA member.

In a similar way we saw earlier how the travel started for a user when she had to prepare for a fear for flying course. The learning to relax through hypnosis was part of her travel experience.

"Travel Experience means everything from planning to memories long after the actual event. At the moment, I'm preparing for a Fear of Flying Course. I'm doing hypnosis, I'm learning to relax. This, for me, is all part of a travel experience. I am travelling across the country to do this flying course and will be staying in a hotel for two nights. And even planning my holidays this year, looking at maps, researching trips, these are all part of the experience".

Many surveys and studies have attempted to explain the dedication to an online community or the reasons why users occasionally write reviews. The reciprocity, 'hedonism' while being acknowledged as a valuable member, the feeling of owing back to the repository of knowledge or just the joy of being helpful are some of the explanations. What the encounter with travellers and loyal fans of travel communities brought to the fore through interviews, was their need to imaginarily travel back and live again the same experiences:

"I think most of users who are big contributors to the forums would rather be traveling but when we can't -as I mentioned- the sharing of information keeps our experience alive", another TA member says.

Keeping the experience alive, even if only in the imagination, has been a crucial part of the travel practice. In previous chapters we have stated that UGC and TripAdvisor do not come as a novelty out of nowhere, but instead are products of a consistent on-going process. Even the idea of place creation, as presented here, could be traced through history to some roots in the "Raree showmen", who wandered around offering people imaginative travels to places that they would never visit physically. Della Dora gives a nostalgic account of the boxes Raree showmen carried (see Figure 26):

"Boxes of all sorts: portable wooden stereo-scopic boxes, which allowed children to travel to marvellous cities they could hold in their hands;

alabaster egg-shaped boxes containing sublime sceneries; dioramic boxes, carrying landscapes that changed with the variation of light...

Containing illusionist panoramic paintings wrapping the visitor, offering him a real-like experience of the actual place they represented. What all these boxes shared was their hidden and yet liberating spatiality; their physical containment and their ability to take the viewer further, visually and imaginatively”.

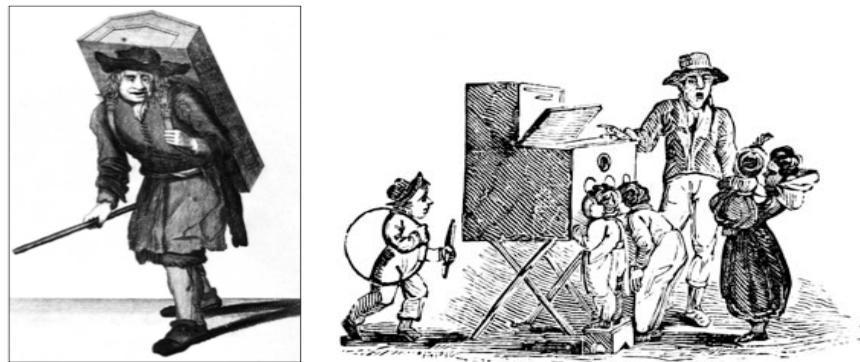


Figure 26 Raree Showman (the first image is in della Dora 2009, original source Balzer 1998)

The author claims that Raree showmen have not disappeared but rather multiplied. They have taken different forms of creating plateness. Souvenirs for instance “crystallize time and space”, as people try to keep moments of remembrance untouched. Travellers carry the place they visited and the memories attached within a small box or package. What these “landscape-objects” allow us to do is “pack the world into a box and move it about, contributing to the shaping of the knowledge of the world itself” (ibid). The idea of preserving place and time by carrying it home is in accordance with the becoming of place. As we *carry* places in different ways we reshape their momentary reputations (formative reputation), when we think about them, talk, write, and create images. Thus UGC is another form of crystallizing place and time and carrying it home. What is different from the souvenir is that this sense of ‘plateness’ is imaginatively shared and relived within the community of travellers/users. No matter whether we have chosen to carry home the practices in the format of memories or a souvenir, when we write a review online we perform reputation anew and this performance has consequences for how and where reputation-making is managed. The last section makes the point clearer.

## 5.8 Consuming place at the 'lobby' and beyond

Hotel managers employ everyday practices in managing reputations, among the other

strategies and goals. Travellers too employ practices when they practice travelling. The discussion about place and its making helps us better appreciate the different practices and their implications later in the thesis. Here we aim to build on the discussion about new and different (in section 2.6.2 on Process) and make clear that the hotel is the same place, no matter where it is instantiated. The online manifestation is not a new place, yet it has made the hotel a different place altogether. The difference is important: In treating the hotel as a concrete and well-defined place represented online, hotel managers agree to engage with practices differently than when treating it as an open place that becomes what it is through a formative process algorithmically-powered. But let us focus on the second and concretize it within managers' frame. Against this backdrop we consider TripAdvisor as a different hotel lobby, or if you prefer the same one differently enacted, where discussions used and still take place, where the manager is asked to come down in order to resolve problems. In the end we come to realize that "both lobbies" have become a unified battleground of reputation-making.

The importance of the lobby has been well acknowledged in the hospitality literature. In general the hotel lobby as McNeil (2008) notes is a "key space in forms of cosmopolitan public interaction" and he goes on to suggest that "the lobby was, in the earliest manifestations of hotel space, an extension of the sidewalk, a public arena where a particular kind of urban sociality flourished". We claim that this public arena has been made manifest online with the form of a community of opinions, compliments and complaints. People write what they would tell in person to the manager or their friends. Their friends on the other end of the spectrum imaginatively 'consume' spaces –landscapes, restaurants, hotels-. Beyond the use of the lobby as a metaphor and given the multiplicity of placeness, it serves as the welcoming place, where guests first arrive once at the hotel. As of the 16 August 2011 635,629 reviews on TripAdvisor refer to the "lobby" as something that was worth mentioning. "Impressive lobby, grand lobby, wonderful, lovely, beautiful, smoky, futuristic, outstanding" as a place where action took place or as a point of reference. Below follows part of a review published on TripAdvisor:

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This was the first encounter of a traveller/guest/author with the place/thing/building/hotel. But if we actively engage with the notion of place as open, then the traveller might well have visited the 'lobby' of TripAdvisor before the feet performed the arrival at the hotel. In this light we can see the interplay of the two lobbies that are constitutive of the same place. In this cyclical process, the lobby is not only the point of arrival, but the point of departure too. TripAdvisor then became for the traveller the extension of the "Grand Lobby", where thoughts have been expressed and shared among the community when the traveller returned home. This is what the user in the beginning of the chapter also did: he transferred the incident which took place at the lobby into the lobby of the hotel on TripAdvisor. Fellow travellers may have chosen to further read, trust and possibly enact this place through reading or even physically performing the journey to the hotel (all of them being different enactments of the same practice: the practice of travelling).

In the same way that placeness forms the travel experience, reputation-making is implicated in the multiple manifestations of place. The chapter began with a story taking place at the lobby we are familiar with and then moved on to a different lobby of the same place called TripAdvisor. Yet beginning and end do not preexist but are analytically abstracted at the moment we choose to turn our attention to the phenomenon. Framing the discussion from the perspective of the hotel manager, Sales Director Europe in TripAdvisor advises hotel managers to treat TripAdvisor exactly like their familiar lobby:

"[r]eputation management is what the general manager does every single day of the week when interacting with the consumer. So we really advise that they just take that thought process and bring it online...imagine this in front of the lobby and that you are talking to the person about the problem, just solve it in exactly the same way".

This brings us back to the discussion about practices and formative reputation. When hotels are treated as places in their becoming that are implicated within practices and intensified because of new practices with complications, the everyday practices of managers and the ways in which they are accomplished are reconfigured. In what follows in the next chapter we will see how hoteliers have been engaging with UGC and how this has reconfigured the priorities within their managing practices (directing resources to detective work, investing in excel spreadsheets, revising the criteria of promotion procedure, including reviews in staff meetings etc.). To further clarify the point, in a recent online article published by travel professionals (on Tnooz.com) the author puts great emphasis on the fact that hotel managers need to realize they have to actively manage all places their properties *exist* and not only the transactional ones (where users can book accommodation). In particular, the author gives the example of the president of global brands and commercial services for Hilton Worldwide who has stated that “Hilton is now focused on ensuring their properties are properly represented and merchandised across all relevant channels<sup>21</sup>”. This simple example is illustrative of how the hotel has moved from being a fixed territory into a mobile open place with emergent time and space configurations. This chapter has prepared us to gain an understanding of the hotel as a place through the perspective of Process in order to be able to understand the different practices of reputation-making and of travelling later in the thesis.

## 5.9 Conclusions

In this chapter, we defined placeness by taking UGC seriously and suggested that hotels should be treated as open and unfolding rather than as fixed territories. We have been introduced to the idea of “thowntogetherness” and familiarized ourselves with the notion of place as resulting from “those happenstance juxtapositions, those accidental separations, the often paradoxical character of geographical configurations in which, precisely a number of distinct trajectories interweave and sometimes interact” (Massey 1999: p.37). The notions of becoming and thowntogetherness helped us theorize and better understand the different manifestations of reputation-making above and beyond the dichotomy physical/ online.

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<sup>21</sup> [http://www.tnooz.com/2012/04/13/news/top-three-hotel-marketing-myths-and-the-truth-behind-them/?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=facebook](http://www.tnooz.com/2012/04/13/news/top-three-hotel-marketing-myths-and-the-truth-behind-them/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook)

As travellers we visit new places, contribute to their (re-)creation and through the postings we make, we leave the process of (re-)creation open. Massey talks about spaces as “always being made... never finished, never closed” (Massey 1999: p.28). We take a picture of a place and then later during a particular moment we want to capture another photo of the same place but it is not the same any more. It becomes something different but most importantly it becomes different when we visit it again with different people and moods – when we are thrown together in different combinations - or when we read about it; it performatively becomes what it momentarily is. Rose (1999: p.248) argues for an understanding of place as ‘a doing, that...does not pre-exist its doing’, and as something that –...is practiced, a matrix of play, dynamic and iterative...”

The becoming of places has taken several meanings and interpretations. This chapter comes as an extension of the notion of becoming introduced earlier, not as the transition from a distinctive point to another but as an endless and emergent process and as the harbinger of the analysis of practicing reputation and travelling that will follow. Against this backdrop the chapter has illustrated how places keep becoming as we perform travelling in various ways (including UGC and TripAdvisor). What the place momentarily becomes, is constitutive of the arrangements of relationships and interactions among diverse ‘elements’ that cross categories in time. In this light, the momentary instantiation of the hotel emerges as people, moods, algorithmic configurations etc. are thrown together, and as such its reputation is very much contingent upon space and time. The becoming of places through the throwntogetherness supports the idea that places are constantly constructed and remade. Therefore when we practice places we reshape them and make them available for the next performance. Mansvelt (2008) puts it: “Reflecting on the temporality of consuming practice is essential because moments constantly shape and make places in numerous ways”. Nowadays more than ever temporality reshapes our perception of places and thus places as the seemingly two are interrelated enactments of the same unified ‘place’.

The performance of travelling has been transformed since the emergence of UGC. Although most everyday activities like shopping, learning, entertainment have been influenced by the presence of the online sphere, travelling is a category of particular interest as the ‘before’, ‘during’ and ‘after’ are intertwined and transcend the

physical and online definitions of space and code. Travellers/users experience and enact places by looking at them, by seeking for information through various channels, by posting their account of how they have performed travelling. Thus reputation-making in the travel sector has to more actively consider how to cope with this perception of inseparable places that happen as we are practicing it.

This chapter has advanced the discussion from the theoretical part of the literature review, where we noted the conceptual meeting points between practice theory and process. We have distilled the generativity of places conceived as practices and doings. In that sense, places are practices yet also in the making; they are implicated once performed and this is an ongoing process. Even though practice and process theories are against stability, they are often referred to as ontologies which is an oxymoron of their nature: how can they be when they only become? To communicate this nuance we enrich practice and process with ideas inspired by human geography, such as the notion of throwtogetherness. Therefore, not only do we experience places in everyday encounters with people and 'things', but places are negotiated and performed as processes of those relationships. As people are 'thrown together' in Rome or in a forum talking about Rome the borderline between physical and online becomes meaningless and Rome emanates as a process through those interactions. Nevertheless, what travel means is a contested issue. Places are remade once we step on them or talk about stepping on them or when we visit them once again or when we talk or read narratives or see images of others' visits. This is the performativity of place-making that is enacted through imagination or is realized in the form of a decision when UGC postings convince people to travel to a destination or to visit a particular hotel.

Moreover, the concept of performativity has been presented in multiple ways here and throughout the thesis. Having seen Feldman and Pentland's performative aspect of practices, Espeland and Sauder's reactive mechanisms, Butler's 'recitation and repetition' (in section 2.7.5), we can say that our analysis has discussed how algorithmically-powered generative mechanisms have had a performative impact on reputation-making. We have seen the multiplicity of performativity being implicated in the algorithmic configurations on TripAdvisor and enacted through performing the place through reading, interpreting, writing, imagining and so forth.

With regards to reputation-making we discussed how treating hotels as processes or as contested places activates different practices and how appreciating hotels' multiple spatial configurations informs everyday practices. Contemporary professionals have to realize that their properties are unfolding rather than static buildings that happen to be represented online and therefore adapt accordingly. Towards this direction we showed how the lobby area is made manifest online and physically, yet in the end it is not distinct from action but becomes meaningful in and through practice. In accordance with this conceptualization we propose places as fundamental to meaning and not as the background where life dramatizes.

Although we have primarily seen place-making through the perspective of travellers, hotel managers do also participate in the place-making process as the story at the beginning of the chapter emphasized. When hotel managers read reviews about their 'place'/hotel and move to change things accordingly, they actively participate in the (re-)creation process of the hotel as a place in the following ways: they can adapt the practices (for instance welcoming, cleaning, check out) or they can say they have done so by writing a management response (as we will see in the following chapter). The (re-)creation then happens performatively (the rumour that the place has been transformed) or physically due to the outcomes that this kind of performativity might have on travellers' future decisions (fewer or more guests will decide to visit the hotel). In this way, hotels as places are made in multiple ways and reputation-making is further negotiated. Managers adapt their practices of reputation-making and they submit reports of the changes online, ready to be read and experienced in this endless chain of performing travel through reputation-making and -breaking: a process that is algorithmically powered and powerful. The following table summarizes the key points in this chapter.

Key points	Tenets of becoming/ the generative mechanism of process
Hotels are treated as open places that exist both on the map and online, adopting a unified perception of place.	Places are enacted through practices (as we visit a place, physically or online, we experience it momentarily and this forms the place further).

<p>Travellers perform travelling differently:</p> <p>Travellers gaze at the same sight (hotel), yet articulate the performance online differently and play their role in how others will form decisions through reviews.</p> <p>This difference has implications for where, how and when reputation-making occurs.</p>	<p>The tourist gaze analyzed from the spectrum of becoming is closely related to the performativity of place-making through imagining, reading, sharing: what we have abstracted as the generative mechanism of process and refers to the power that the act of sharing the gaze has in terms of changing the place and its temporary reputation.</p>
<p>The power of the practice of reading about a place and viewing other travellers' images is such that it recreates it, as we take a decision to visit it or not, to be 'thrown together' there at this moment or not.</p> <p>The performativity however is not only instantiated in reading, viewing and interpreting travel reviews, but is also algorithmically-powered.</p>	<p>The notion of throwtogetherness is employed in the study to show how formative reputation emerges as a product of place-making in time. In other words how combinations of diverse 'elements' redefine placeness and influence other people to decide whether and how they will visit the place (hotel).</p>
<p>TripAdvisor as another enactment of travelling has made the hotel a place for managing reputation: a battleground of reputation-making.</p> <p>We consider TripAdvisor as the extended hotel lobby, where discussions used and still take place.</p>	<p>The emergent nature of places has been further enriched. It is not only that hotels have a physical and online presence but these come into existence only in and through practice.</p>
<p>Main idea of the chapter: The perception of placeness activates differently reputation-making that has to be appreciated and incorporated within contemporary routines. In treating hotels as open and moving places perpetually recreated in the moment through practices, managers realize that reputation extends beyond snap shot assessments or post-hoc crisis management to on-going maintenance of its emergence and development across time and space. Here we illustrate the generative part of formative reputation that draws on the multiple configurations of practices that are intensified and algorithmically-powered via ranking and rating mechanisms.</p>	

**Table 16 Key points of chapter five**

## Chapter 6 Reputation-making in the *making*

### 6.1 Introduction

What do an Italian writer in his early seventies; a 23-year-old Scandinavian chef; a middle-aged Australian housewife; a Chinese finishing her specialization in Pediatrics; and an American investment banker based in London 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 an online travel community like 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 24<sup>th</sup> floor of the hotel in Boston where she stayed exceeded her expectations. The Chinese rushed to warn fellow travellers 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 favourite CD on the bedside-table after she had Tweeted about missing her music collection while being away from home. The investment banker appreciated the prompt help of the technician when his laptop broke down which saved him hours of work and relieved significant stress.

This diverse crowd is typical of the mosaic of people sharing experiences and allocating scores to hotels on rating/ranking travel websites. The small acts performed by the aforementioned hotels or more precisely the reviews posted about these small acts seem to positively contribute to their reputation-making. Perhaps these hotels have always gone the extra mile - or not - but now people know about it on a great scale across many continents: It is not a whisper but a loud shout. Now that we have discussed how the hotel as a place is differently enacted and therefore made, we return to the practices that are constitutive of reputation-making and the research question in this dissertation: how have UGC websites transformed organizational reputation-making in the travel sector? In particular we will look at the practices of reputation-making, how they have been transformed and how these transformations have made the world of travelling a different world.

The importance of reputational standings in travel has been made manifest in the literature (Gruen et al. 2006; Gretzel and Yoo 2008) and data presented earlier led us to an empirical appreciation of this rather logical assumption: that no matter how reputation is established and maintained and whether it is viewed as an emergent temporary arrangement like here or as a possessed asset as in the majority of academic literature, it is a critical organizational achievement associated with sustainability and success. In particular TripAdvisor's Sales Director and the Spanish Community specialist gave illustrations where hotels' performance has been influenced by their rankings and comments on TripAdvisor (see page 140). Hoteliers also confirm this tendency and have started monitoring this relationship more systematically (see for instance the Excel spreadsheet on p. 139). We have seen that the issue of reputation-making has been raised by every 'system' in place over time. Necessary precursors to online UGC have been considered the autobiographical travelogues, bankers and ambassadors as carriers of authority for tourists being in unfamiliar places and later on guidebooks and accreditation schemes until the emergence of the Internet and social media which allowed the dynamic unfolding of current information.

We have established that reputation-making is a complex concept of significant importance for the organization. As such it has been treated as a "perceptual representation" (Fombrun 1996: p.72), an intangible asset (Cravens et al. 2003; Hall 2002; Rindova et al. 2007; Schelling 1980; Taewon and Amine 2007), a global impression (Deephouse 2000) and a relational concept (Brown and Logsdon 1999; Standifird 2001). All these labels do not exclude each other in practice even though they may relate to different "styles of thinking" (Chia 1995) that exist in tension with each other. However, it does not become clear how the departure point of assuming that reputation *is* an asset came to be dominant or why we tend to take it as a resource. This forms the foundation for the discussion that follows where we look at reputation as emergent and ongoing through practices. Through the lenses of Process, reputation is highly situated in time and enacted through practices, strategies and decisions. The process is ongoing and even though it has consequences, the rationalistic linear logic of inputs and outcomes should be abandoned to understand the rhythmic transformations of reputation that is unfolding.

## 6.2 Reputation-making defined through ongoing everyday practices

It is this chapter where we will revisit the ideas introduced earlier grounded in Process Theory and addressed by the practice-based studies. Looking at reputation as a process unfolding while information is generated, invites reflection on the concept of reputation altogether as well as the tensions that the phenomenon introduces and intensifies for the organizations involved. In the introductory vignette of the chapter we saw some practices that aimed at providing good service and at times exceeded expectations. Let us suppose that the hotel where truffles and champagne were served was a 4 star according to Visit Britain and the AA. This kind of treatment would probably resemble a 5-star classification scheme and chances are that the traveller would search for a dynamic platform of travel social media to report this experience. Thus such practices come to centre stage as enactments of reputation-making and of the travel experience.

Both the academic literature, as well as practitioners in the sector have related reputation to choosing places –with the broad meaning we gave in the previous chapter- and have attempted to manage this procedure through specific practices. Let us remind the reader about the hotel manager in Mexico who said that the management daily meetings start with references to UGC reviews and analysis of their content. However, reputation-making appears in many ways well before monitoring practices. In the hospitality sector and in particular in the lodging sector such everyday practices have been reported since the early days. Having presented the empirical chapter, in the next paragraphs we historically present some dominant early practices in the hospitality sector which are then related to organizational practices ranging from profiling guests, collecting feedback through comment cards and phone interactions to managing technological innovations of the pre-Web 2.0 era such as the corporate website and the email.

The way to guest satisfaction has always been perceived as strategic and various practices to accommodate travellers' needs have been introduced. Enz and Siguaw (2003) in their extensive study on hotels best practices report 115 functional best practices. Among those some were applied by Peninsula Beverly Hills Hotel, which offered 24-hour check-in and check-out, the option of shipping in advance and even storing guests' luggage at the hotel, restaurant napkins with guests' initials, mini-bars

stocked according to guests' preferences, and their preferred music CDs in the room. Ritz-Carlton in Chicago initiated a personalized technological support service and printers in all suites. Colony Hotel was a leading hotel that actively involved guests in recycling and education and many more examples of timely best practices. In a more recent account of best practices a user on TripAdvisor mentions in the published review "the lemongrass tea upon arrival" and "secret gifts upon checkout" ranging from pens, lighters or any other souvenirs with the logo of the hotel printed:

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(a user's review posted on TripAdvisor)

This kind of reputation-making activity differs from the practices specified for service delivery. We learn about the way that service has surpassed expectation and overflowed standard categories through rumours or news about practices with the performative sense of co-creating meaning through a different way of practicing: talking about practices. In other words, the staff may not have decided in advance to serve the lemongrass tea but it seemed appropriate in the moment and this practice has reached other from a guest who experienced it. If we treat the practice of 'welcoming' as an enactment of reputation-making performed by the hotel staff, a way to distill it could be Feldman and Pentland's (2003) differentiation between ostensive and performative parts of the routine (see section 2.5 in the literature review).

Against this backdrop the ostensive section is the "abstract, generalized idea of the routine, or the routine in principle" while the performative "consists of specific actions, by specific people, in specific places and times. It is the routine in practice" (ibid). In this context the ostensive would be the principle of welcoming guests and the performative would be the way this is accomplished, namely the lemongrass tea upon arrival and the difference that this made. However, beyond this realization there are further insights that we can develop regarding performativity from a process perspective. Prior literature such as Espeland and Sauder (2007) or Power

(2009) present performativity as ‘reactive’ and ‘self-reinforcing’ (see section 2.7.5). However the notion of becoming implies a more generative overflowing even for seemingly procedural or standard organizational structures such as repetitive practices. Having clarified this, we will come back to the realization that the performativity of practices as explained earlier is a practice itself or more precisely the same sort of practice which is enacted in different ways. It follows that we have to work out ways of treating them (the practice and its performativity through sharing the practice) as an inseparable process. For now, let us return to the practices performed by hotel managers over time.

Hotel managers regularly experiment with practices in order to differentiate their businesses from the competitors. One could argue that the technologies enabling this infrastructure intensive highly globalized service sector have made particular kinds of innovation a likelihood. Even back in 1984 Schaffer foresaw that “hospitality organizations, because of their service orientation are likely to be faced with a greater degree of technological complexity than many other types of organization”. The rise of the independent traveller and low cost airlines went hand in hand with the development of hotel websites. These were initially seen as an opportunity to provide information about services and in a way supplement friends, families and travel agencies (Murphy et al. 2003). The widespread adoption of e-mail made major steps towards timely communication and personalized interaction. In Relationship Marketing it also enabled customers to e-mail their friends via virtual postcards or referral buttons (*ibid*) and spread the word.

In the review above the email communication has served as part of the travel practice and has been an integral part of enacting the particular place (the hotel). The hotel manager in Mexico, while talking on Skype, showed me his screen (using Skype’s share screen functionality), where I could see his emails and agenda. He then sent me print screens of those by email which will not be presented here for privacy reasons, yet the key message was the amount of energy spent on answering emails through all stages, as divided by hotel professionals: prior to booking when guests have questions or after the visit when they complain or compliment about the service they experienced. What has also to be noted here is the detective work attached, whereby he tried to trace who is who in different possible channels online in order to get an idea of potential guests’ tastes, interests, whether they might write on TripAdvisor,

whether they are bloggers or involved with UGC in general. He actually showed me step by step the procedure:

“These are identified guests who had contacted me ahead of time. I then file them under the particular dates. So under August I was able to see K.A. With a little bit of investigation and research on that you can determine who is who. This is integrated in a lot of different ways. It does take time, it does take effort to stay on top of it. However in a resort property these people are here 5 and 7 days and you do get to know them. So TripAdvisor has allowed me to reach thousands and thousands of people that I would never reach otherwise”.

This type of profiling of customers will be covered later in the chapter. However monitoring and reporting feedback is not a new practice in the sector as we also showed in the empirical chapter. Guest surveys, comment cards and phone interactions were the first platforms where travellers could “share” their opinion within the limited borders of the organization/hotel. The most popular formal feedback mechanism though was guest surveys and took two forms: comment cards and questionnaires. Yesawich (1978) mentions the “guest surveys” as the “primary source of market information”. Hoteliers had in their hands valuable data that could be analysed with “myriad techniques, ranging from manual procedures to the application of computers”. The VP of Brand Marketing at Hilton Hotels noted in our interview in San Francisco, how Hilton still conducts surveys and focus groups only distributed among the most loyal guests, the ‘Embassadors’ (sic), on the Embassy Suites website. Big hotel chains in early eighties had as their quality priority to provide unique and unusual service to sophisticated customers. Hyatt initiated a system of peer inspections, called “Management Operations Review”, as a “checks and balance” system to insure that quality expectations were being met (Garbedian 1980). This is reported as an internal system equivalent to tourism board inspections implemented by a big brand to ensure quality standards and homogenization within the chain.

It is argued that retrospectively we can see reputation-making enacted through such practices (both on the side of service delivery and on the monitoring side). Through the arrested moments described by our research participants we witness reputation in its momentary enactment: the timely personalized e-mail, the moment that the guest received an unexpected bottle of wine or the moment when the door opened and a

technician came to fix their laptop, (as in the examples of the vignette in the beginning of the chapter). Abstracting reputation into the smallest possible constitutive moments (the enactment of everyday situated practice) rather than defining it separately as an asset or at a distance (“as an individual construction about an organization or “a collective impression” (Deephouse 2000; Fombrun 1996 etc.) allows us to bridge the seeming gap and transcend the artificial dichotomy between practicing reputation and its online representation. What we aim to explain here is that we are not witnessing two separate platforms, namely the physical premises of the hotel where managers and staff employ practices and the online sphere where travellers write about how they enacted those practices. Having theorized place as a unified concept beyond and above geographical restrictions and having explained the principles of process, practice and performativity we can safely present TripAdvisor as an ontological machine that makes different hotel managers, different travellers, different practices. But *different* as it has been defined in chapter two. Visiting the hotel and writing about this visit are two interrelated enactments of the same practice: the practice of travelling.

In this vein answering a question at the reception and online on TripAdvisor are two interrelated enactments of the same practice: the practice of reputation-making. The use of managing as opposed to management follows the acknowledgement that reputation is always in the making and so are the constitutive practices that are related to this process. As stated in section 2.5, organizational theorists who have employed the practice lens to analyze the dynamics of practices have shown the difference in perceiving managerial strategies as stable dispositions as opposed to temporary accomplishments enacted and situated through use. We saw how practices are treated as generative systems created through the interplays between actions people undertake and the structures these actions in turn recreate. With analyzing reputation from the prism of Process and practice, we gain a more focused understanding of the interplays between the ways practices are enacted and therefore we refer to reputation-making rather than reputation management.

We contextualize this abstract discussion in the context of the thesis as follows: if reputation-making (and not management) is perceived through everyday practices, then it becomes interesting to analyze the transformation that UGC brought about and consider the ways in which this might inform a revised contemporary reputation

agenda. Practice theory would say that the emergence of UGC should not be treated as an ‘exogenous shock’ that fuelled changes in how reputation is practiced but is rather grounded in the everyday use and action. From a process standpoint, we are more intrigued to sense the transformation as interplay between practices performed by managers and their interrelated enactment online. Have the practices become different or has the conceptualization of what reputation-making is and how it is constituted and instantiated?

Feldman (2003) emphasizes that while managers change routines they produce new ways to conceptualize them, “but the routine as a whole may not change because the idea is not consistent with performances that need to be different in order to bring about the intended change”. As a hotel manager in Edinburgh says about reputation, “it is a process and you really have to protect it, it is reputation and integrity that you have to completely protect”. In this thesis, we claim that the underlying fundamental principles of reputation-making have endured since the doors of the first well-regarded hotel were opened. The ways reputation-making is protected are multiple and ongoing but it is interesting to see their variation across time with the emergence of technological innovations from the perspective of Process Theory which comes to move Practice forward with a more intensive view on the generative character: service and hospitality in the UGC era.

Table 17 summarizes the traditional practices we mentioned so far.

<b>Traditional practices</b>
Guest Surveys and questionnaires to identify the best marketing channels
Performance measurement through “listening guest”, focus groups, comments cards
Use of mass media for advertisement
TV ads for exposure and Teletext services
Small gifts with the hotel’s logo printed, such as pens, lighters, mouse pads
Closed groups and mailing lists with special benefits (such as Hilton Embassy)
Viral marketing, which lets visitors e-mail friends to suggest the site (via virtual postcards, referral buttons, and so forth).
Managing database communications and reservations to find more about customers
Monitoring customers’ quality perceptions, evaluating departments’ performance to reward employees and managers.
Peer inspections on site

**Table 17 Traditional Practices**

### 6.3 How has reputation-making become

So far we have argued that reputation-making is defined through everyday practices. This way of perceiving reputation provides us with the analytic tools for understanding how transformations have happened. Their nature will be challenged using Tsoukas and Chia's propositions about microscopic change, along with Feldman's invitation to look at how the internal dynamic of routines can foster change. Contrary to the common perception about the fixity of routines, Feldman (2000) explains how routines can change and still be the same: Their elements remain the same while what changes, is the way they are accomplished. Through a similar argumentation we will now turn our attention to the different enactments of reputation-making that the Internet brought about. Before we do so, we first have to explain the nature of the transition through the lenses of becoming, following section 2.6.6 where we analysed the processual nature of change.

Having introduced Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of "becoming" as moving away from one notion and landing on another, as moving from the one moment and creating a new moment, what they call deterritorialization and re-territorialization respectively, we are familiar with the idea that time does not start and end, neither does a phenomenon that is becoming. From this perspective, reputation-making is constantly becoming, it is transforming because of its instantiations and multiple enactments. What then characterizes the object and thus its momentary reputation is movement:

"Such an ontology of becoming is an understanding of the world as fundamentally dynamic. In terms of Bergson's object, it is not that, in moving, the object changes from one fixed thing to another fixed thing (which is what an ontology of being might assume). Instead it is that what constitutes or characterizes the object, what the object is, is movement; the object is (always) becoming" (Coleman, 2008).

Seen in this light, this is a further reason why we focus on reputation-making and not reputation and its management: It is the movement that identifies what reputation *is*, and as we will show reputation-making is always in the making. If we accept that every moment perishes when the following appears and based on the becoming of entities – with the Whiteheadian meaning as drops or events of space-time (Mesle 2008: p.95) we should understand movement as recreation and generativity. In the section on Process we defined becoming and emphasized that unity does not happen

because independent components come together, but there is nothing else to be seen other than the unity. Even though in the context of organization studies this conceptualization can be very informative in principle, it would be too abstract in the everyday routine of reputation managers. To become more specific, an analysis of *reputation management* would support the distinction between physical and online practices whose *ex post* addition would constitute reputation management as a unity. Contrary to this, becoming allows us to see reputation-making already as a unity, as there is no separation to be noted. However, transformations while becoming occur and revise our familiar frameworks by introducing different ways of practicing. Below we will attempt to pause the time as if we could tell when these transformations happened, when the one moment gave its place to the other and thus perished, when the traditional practices in the travel sector *became* online or e-strategies.

The evolution of technology has undoubtedly influenced how reputation-making is enacted in the hotel sector. When the Internet emerged, a whole new channel was available with unimaginable scope; a “virtual communication space”, as Sigala (2003) expresses it. As reviewed in a previous chapter the emergence of social media introduced online word of mouth and consumer reviews flourished. Tussyadiah et al. (2011) further emphasize the influence of stories and their “ability to convey the values of the products/services to the buying minds of the audiences”. We would include in this not only stories on TripAdvisor about hotels, but also stories about TripAdvisor (meta-stories) published on, for example, Helium.com, Viewpoints.com and in travel blogs that have had an impact on the credibility of the UGC website and then consequently on its content. As discussed earlier, users wanted something beyond the star-classification schemes. A user highlighted this need:

“For instance, I have stayed in some 5-star hotels that were awful. Either the hotel failed to live up to its touted quality of service or never bothered to inform us when we made the reservation that the hotel’s only restaurant was closed or that construction would be going on during our stay”.

This kind of information became possible on UGC. Baker and Green (2005) talk about the emergence of travel social media as “the most explosive outbreak of information the world has ever seen since the creation of the Internet”. However, acknowledging the catalytic role that technology and social media in particular have

played, it is argued that studying reputation-making and not reputation as an object presupposes constant movement. Therefore we cannot talk about change from A to B or about a new era of reputation management. More specifically, we will refer to the different practicing online, as presented through the eyes of hotel managers, owners, travel experts, consultants and academics during the study as yet another enactment. These practices will then be summarized to show how they are constitutive of the hotel as a place or in other words how what we term *formative reputation* is constitutive of practices rather than constituted by them. As Rerup and Feldman (2011) suggest “by breaking routines into parts, rather than treating them as entities, we expose the microfoundation of observable action”. To illustrate the argument we break practices into constitutive parts with the use of the construct of abstraction which acknowledges the artificial separation of unities for the purpose of analysis, and present examples and data from the post-UGC era (summarized in table 18).

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#### **Online practices/ on the way from web 1.0 to web 2.0 ...**

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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 using Google analytics, web analysers and other sophisticated tools

Use of social media to advertise campaigns and offers

YouTube channel to upload videos and highlight destinations

Free widgets and screensavers that users can download and use (some of which allow direct booking)

Benefits exclusive to a channel’s fans and followers (discounts for Twitter fans or Facebook only), Blogging

Facebook like button and groups on Facebook, LinkedIn etc.

Relating information on various platforms to identify who the customers are (for instance TripAdvisor reviews with reservation records)

Bonuses and promotions based on social media feedback

User-generated “inspections”

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**Table 18 Online practices**

In this regard, we will first revisit the online enactments of reputation-making part of which is monitoring UGC. A core practice of interest here is related to how organizational information is communicated to people. Back in the 90s’ Teletext services in the UK were extensively used by tour operators “to give information

directly to consumers, without requiring the intervention of a travel agent" (Palmer and Mayer 1996). This was the revolutionary independence of that time. In 2012 channels like Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube are considered highly influential to gain an audience and to communicate 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 hotel's accounts by enriching them 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. An example of a hotel combining all is The Gainey Suites Hotel in Scottsdale which is active on Twitter, has uploaded videos on YouTube, is present on Flickr with attractive pictures and uses Facebook to promote special events<sup>22</sup>. This very active involvement with social media is followed by a number one position on TripAdvisor. 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 enactments mature but 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.

With regards to feedback and its managing, 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

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.hospitalitynet.org/news//4045860.html>

followers. Being aware of the strong channels that bring more traffic and bookings managers are informed about where to put emphasis. As Pullman (2005) says, computer-based qualitative tools can be used to achieve performance monitoring, and targeted strategy formulation.

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 et al. 2009; Plaza 2011; Rodriguez-Burrel 2009 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. At the World Travel Market 2011, Josiah McKenzie, General Manager of ReviewPro, presented a case study of Amelia Hotel where he showed how the tool helped the management team to gain insights through semantic analysis of reviews as well as through the use of the GRI. This again shows the tension between the interrelated enactments of what hotel managers do to ensure qualitative service through practices.

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 last year to work on strategy and fill in gaps, such as monitoring middle-of-the-night missives<sup>23</sup>". One could therefore say that the hotel's practices have changed, but this would reflect a static definition of practices "as a single pattern" (Feldman 2000 about routines). As we will claim practices are accomplished in multiple (generative) ways and have *become* and transformed rather than changed.

The hotel manager in Mexico for instance has adjusted his actions, as he exploited

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<sup>23</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704256304575320730977161348.html>

the possibilities that UGC opens up. The practices he engaged with are illustrative of how the epistemics of information and its performative nature has informed reputation-making. As discussed in the literature review, Knorr Cetina (2010) introduces the concept of the ‘epistemics of information’ in the context of financial markets and argues that what counts is the “news rather than the truth”. She shows how information unfolding in the form of rumours not necessarily substantiated and confirmed, has an impact and fuels changes in the market. In that sense, rumours about Bin Laden’s death for instance - irrespective of their validity influence the price of oil, the dollar and a series of political and diplomatic decisions.

We show that the case of UGC reviews as a possible enactment of reputation-making and travelling falls under the umbrella term of “the epistemics of information” and further illustrates how new forms of knowing redefine both. No matter whether reviews are substantiated or not, the fact of them coming into being through publication creates expectations for travellers and forces managers to engage with them and adapt their practices. However the observation that UGC makes a difference should not lead us to assume that reputation-making as performatively enacted online is separate from reputation-making in hotels – these are not two independent facets of reputation as already stated many times so far.

If we focus on the nature of transformation and draw a parallel with practice theory, we can say that what is transformed is not necessarily the definition of the practice but its becoming as a situated accomplishment. In other words, what is transformed is how the practice is enacted, which anyway is the case as every practicing is always different. In the travel sector, Sigala (2003) differentiates between practices and techniques by saying that many researchers argue that the core practices will continue, what will change are “the techniques by which the marketing mix variables are realized to exploit the enhanced and new capabilities of the medium”. Put in different words, reputation-making has not changed in its fundamentals but through the ways in which it is accomplished. A hotel manager at a big chain in the UK comments on the issue:

“I don’t believe that reputation has changed since TripAdvisor emerged but it has remained constant and all what happened is that we are able to receive more comments and more comments about us are visible to other potential customers but our reputation has not changed. The exposure of the hotel has changed, yes. The visibility of the hotel has changed, the

ability of customers to learn about the hotel has changed but it has only been positive. You obviously get customers who do read negative comments but we just deal with them as a management response”.

What has also been transformed by degree 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 doesn’t 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 his area) during our online interview. The microscopic change compared to the pre-UGC phase then lies in preparing the grounds to ensure that the exceptional service is recognized. A traveller 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.

Now that we have identified and compared everyday key practices of reputation-making and their constitutive relations with the travel experience, we return to what is meant by the processual nature of change. The processual nature of change is grounded in two core assumptions. First reputation enacted through practices is perceived as tentative and ongoing. And, secondly, change through the lens of Process Theory and becoming does not occur as a new state of being: from A to B. In section 2.6.6 we looked at change and movement through the eyes of Bergson and Deleuze and pointed out their differences in perceiving cinematography. Here, we will remind the reader the core distinction in perceiving movement that will help us understand what we mean with the processual nature of change that does not happen from A to B. Movement is not produced because fixed pictures are put together the one after the other at a great speed, but movement works continuously and is all that we have. In this light the different enactments of reputation-making that are usually associated with changes in hotels’ performance, revenue and sustainability are

nothing else but part of the movement of reputation-making in time. Many would disagree and argue at this point that the travel sector has undergone a major change. A differentiation between the common use of the word change and the one employed here casts some light on the argument. Before we elaborate on this important turn in the thesis, we will first merge the two tables with the traditional enactments of practicing reputation and the different enactments that UGC brought about into one:

Traditional practices	Online practices/ on the way from web 1.0 to web 2.0 ...
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 with special benefits (such as Hilton Embassy)	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 button and groups on Facebook, LinkedIn 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 19 Traditional and online practices

According to Process Theory a phenomenon is constituted while it is moving. Against an ontology of substances (see section 2.6.1) it *is* not, it rather *becomes* during its movement and it is constantly on the move. Hence the tables above are enactments of the movement to help us make the point. According to the Cartesian ontology of substances the transition from traditional to UGC practices would be considered a change with consequences. We introduce the notion of “change through *non-change*” to underline the tension between the two different uses of this term through the different ‘styles of thinking’. On the one hand scholars would say that reputation as an asset has changed if we focus on the impact through booking rates and revenue, yet on the other the phenomenon of reputation-making as a category-in-use endures over time (becoming through the movement of practice through time) and is different every time it is enacted. Therefore organizational change is not considered as an aberration from stability or a discrete outcome driven by exogenous factors, but rather it is instantiated through everyday practices and becomes manifest through enactment. These enactments can be more or less powerful, (per)formative or legitimate: all three adjectives are core concepts in the three analysis chapters.

Let us give an example of a change through non-change which shows the different way of practicing reputation, yet through the lenses of becoming this is not a ‘change’. Publishing reviews with references to employees is a different act from recruiting new employees, primarily due to the obvious reason that publishing is performed by travellers and recruiting by hotel managers. These two independent acts can be nevertheless considered as two interrelated enactments of the same practice with regards to reputation-making. When the manager recruits a celebrity to prepare cocktails at the bar in order to boost publicity and attract guests, we can talk about a distinguishable initiative, a strategic choice. However, when guests post reviews on TripAdvisor about, for instance, Antonio the bartender and head of the bar at the Egerton House Hotel in London, he becomes publicized for his skills which attracts guests. Antonio has worked at the Egerton for ages – thus no apparent change occurred – but through UGC we witness the hotel’s reputational *becoming* through a revised entanglement in the relations of ‘knowledge information’ and action – all aspects of practicing reputation and travelling. All five comments about Antonio that follow are parts of reviews published on TripAdvisor:

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We therefore witness two interrelated enactments of reputation-making, the one through drinking cocktails at the bar and the other through different ways of practicing the cocktails at the broader 'bar' (the reader should not forget the definition of the hotel as an open place, as analyzed in the previous chapter). This separation, yet meaningful, can nevertheless turn out to be misleading as it lends itself to different assumptions and it resembles a separation from the standpoint of the Cartesian ontology of substances. In our discussion we take this artificial separation to be one practice, not an assemblage of two but one emerging and unfolding process in its own right. This clarification is very enlightening to better understand the processual nature of change as transformation. Reputation-making seen in this light is simultaneously a sustained and maintained common practice, the focused manifestation of practice all of which relates to multiple performative becomings. In this thesis, we have coined the term formative reputation-making to communicate the inseparability of reputation happening here, there or elsewhere, physically and online.

The example of Antonio's bar performances discussed above serves as an illustration of reputational becoming, of a change through non-change demonstrating the inseparability of offline practices and their online enactments. Our process lens reveals a further important nuance at this point in the thesis; not only do we have to come to terms with the tenet of becoming through practice (i.e. that the world is in constant flux rather than moving from state A to state B) but we also need to find a way of appreciating that the manifestation of practices we observe is achieved through abstractions. The change through non- change is a turn that allows us to abstract snapshots of the phenomenon while on the move and to acknowledge possible consequences without abandoning the idea of Process.

Earlier in this thesis we wondered whether we are part of the movement or external observers. We as ‘researchers’, our analysis, and its intervention in the world are highly situated. Therefore we are continually charged with the additional effort of relating to a constantly changing phenomenon as well as identifying (as far as we can) ways in which we have become *involved observers*.

Furthermore, the process lens enables us to recognize that the different enactments that we are witnessing with the emergence of the Internet and social media have not brought about a whole ‘new’ pristine and original phenomenon called ‘reputation management’ or spawned the need for a separate “textbook” for something called “UGC reputation management” but they make differences in an on-going world. Particular relationships have been intensified in specific ways with consequences for what it means to be a host, a guest, a great hotel at any one time and place. The characteristic dynamism and distinctive becoming of UGC need to be taken into account in where, when and how reputation managing is accomplished. These may seem subtle – and perhaps to some overly philosophical points - but it is argued that they make a critical difference to the disposition that all involved adopt, the enactment of practicing reputation and the differences that this makes in the world.

For these reasons, the study suggests formative reputation as a vehicle to support a better understanding of the constitutive nature of reputation in the making and what this means for practice. As discussed above, in order to achieve this we need to abstract the different configurations of people, places and processes that are thrown together as arrested moments and are constitutive of the organization at the point we look at it. The following section therefore focuses on how reputation-making influences the practice of travelling and further explores the different ways of knowing.

#### **6.4 Experience and expectation as manifestations of knowing**

The chapter until this point has treated reputation-making from a standpoint that emphasizes its fluid dimension and hence the difficulties in defining it as a static asset. Admittedly, there is an oxymoron in trying to redefine a concept by arguing the challenge to define it outside arrested moments of experience and micro

practices. Against an ontology of substances that needs a label to talk about a phenomenon (reputation as an asset, reputation as a social construction etc.), the becoming of reputation aims to illustrate its constant movement in time. While reputation is moving, it is unavoidably transformed, not because it becomes something new but because the arrangements of its manifestation are enacted differently and the researcher has also become a different person along with what a definition meant in the first instance and at the moment of observation. As noted many times, we can never step on the same river twice.

What follows, is an attempt to study reputation-making from within (as suggested by Bergson and applied in the work of Tsoukas) we are encouraged to ‘dive into’ the phenomenon instead of talking about it. However, the way we interpret and make use of the “from within” differs from the conceptualization of Bergson and later Tsoukas and Chia who differentiate between direct knowledge (intuition, knowledge from direct encounter) and conceptual knowledge (mediated knowledge about). Our different conceptualization does not lie in the epistemological - how knowledge about the phenomenon is acquired - and methodological approach of studying reputation-making but in how the participants in the study enact reputation in practice. We will go on to claim that what has been perceived as *conceptual* knowledge has always been *direct* too, both are co-constitutive and not extreme ends. This realization advances our knowledge of Urry’s mediated gaze, which refers to the encounter with sites originally experienced via the media.

As discussed above, epistemologically and methodologically the study identifies itself with the directness that is also imbued with meaning in the context of the case study and netnography. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) aptly put it: “Only a direct perception of reality will enable one to get a glimpse of its most salient characteristics - its constantly changing texture, its indivisible continuity, the conflux of the same with the different over time”. By escaping fixed categories, we move away from representations and instead, think of practices as enacted instances open to negotiation. In that sense published reviews serve as another way of practicing. It therefore becomes interesting to look at those practices in more detail – from within - as they are constitutive of what we have proposed as formative reputation.

Studying reputation-making from within is interpreted here as enacting reputation

through events, from travellers' standpoint. Therefore it is not a spatialisation of place but rather a different perspective. 'Experiencing' in the hospitality sector is a complex phenomenon influenced by guests' unique expectations and evaluations (Crotts et al. 2009). Indeed in the tourism literature and professional training courses, the factors that create satisfaction (Pernecke and Jamal 2010) have been the focus of considerable interest. Berman (2005) talks about delight, as an extension of "unexpected value or surprise". Delight in the era of social media is the reason why travellers would like to share and relate experiences. The review we saw earlier demonstrates this very effectively. The user comments on the quick response to her email enquiry and then praises staff attitude and customer service by giving examples of little surprises and treats (Khmer bedtime stories, secret gifts upon checkout). At the end of the review, she clearly emphasizes that the way in which the hotel has exceeded expectations asserts that this has encouraged her to visit again ("We WILL be back to this charming hotel").

Since we mentioned Egerton Hotel in the previous section, we will follow through with a review which conveys how this hotel exceeded expectations:

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(a user's review posted on TripAdvisor)

This is typical of the kind of comments that positive reviews contain. Academics and travel experts do not dispute the importance of relating expectations and experience in the travel sector (see Scott and Orlikowski 2012a). Walls et al. (2011) maintain that "more and more companies in the hospitality and tourism industry are focusing on creating and managing "experiences" for their customers" in relation to perceived expectations of what satisfactory or delightful might mean. In this thesis, it is suggested that the 'delight-fullness' of expectations and hotel experiences is made manifest and achieved through performance - evolution rather than change. For instance in 1995, Palmer and Mayer note that "frequent flyer programmes had

become part of travellers' expectations". When these programmes were first introduced they might well have been a competitive advantage, an experience that exceeded expectations, whereas now they are taken for granted and all air companies have developed loyalty schemes.

If we assume that reputation-making and -taking is formed through enacting expectations, it is interesting to see how this is facilitated and why we define direct – from within- differently. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) cite Bergson and James to give an account of the acquisition of direct knowledge as opposed to conceptual one. They both clarify that "we know a city through walking on its streets rather than via photographs of it" (Bergson 1946: p.160; James 1909/1996: pp.262–263). Although this study aligns with the principle that "change must be approached from within — not as an 'abstract concept' (James 1909/1996: p.235) but as a performance enacted in time" (*ibid*), we claim that UGC has allowed us to realize that direct and conceptual are co-constitutive aspects of the practice of reputation-taking (taking because now we look at the phenomenon from the perspective of travellers). Travellers can enact reputations from within even in cases that they seemingly 'visit' the place from a distance (imaginatively and vicariously). This last clarification is meaningless after all, as both the omission of imaginary travel as well as its separation from physical would refer us back to the dichotomy physical- online. Travellers always enact places and their reputation directly and from within and they can potentially reconsider through others' eyes even when they have already visited the place in the past. This means that the process of creating expectations is influenced even under circumstances of no or limited asymmetry of information, when they have already visited a place but the place is reintroduced to them when other people share their experiences about it. Reading about it is another enactment of practicing it by themselves. If reputation were strictly speaking an organizational asset, it would be hard to explain the performative power of reviews. Formative reputation allows us to dynamically appreciate the configurations that diverse elements constitute. People on TripAdvisor gaze at the world through the eyes of others, yet they manage to acquire information as directly as they would if they had physically visited the place themselves. And in so doing the separation becomes misleading and irrelevant.

In the empirical chapter users described how they changed opinions due to reviews even though they had been to the places (hotels) before or they rediscovered places (destinations) through fellow travellers' suggestions even though one user claimed to have been 14 times to the same place. What is worth emphasizing though is the intensity of becoming through social media and UGC relative to traditional media. So far we have seen the positive side of this becoming, the dialectical relations through which we witness reputation-making and conversion to revenue. Here we have claimed that the emergence of UGC has not led to a separate UGC reputation managing in which it is possible to sit in an office engaging with social media expecting improved hotel performance without enacting - knowing and practicing – life in hotels. However, we have recognized that particular relations have been intensified in specific ways and that this has to be taken into account in the practice of reputation-making. Later, in the last analysis chapter, we turn our attention to a manifestation of this intensification of relations that has made TripAdvisor somewhat notorious among hoteliers: the dark-side of UGC, the becoming of contestation and dispute, the breaking rather than the making of hotels.

To return to our concern with the artificial separation between direct and mediated forms of enactment, we argue that social media has introduced a different type of knowing that has provided travellers with the “glasses” to gaze and enact without the feet having to perform the journey. Somehow social media gave an intuitive shape to peoples' expectations and imagination. It became a platform of inspiration when they wanted a confirmation or a fresh idea. “So we started hearing people saying that I was thinking of going to the Caribbean but I didn't really know which island to go to and UGC helped me decide I want to go to Aruba. Or I might go to San Diego”, says TripAdvisor's Sales Director. We begin to see postings in which travellers complain that they are dissatisfied because they did not get the free room upgrade with river view that another travellers who posted on TA reported getting or their unhappiness that they did not find an extra surprise in the room as described by others, in other words they were let down by the absence of the delight that has been incorporated in their expectations informally through their engagement with TripAdvisor. Such enactments of service had manifested for the other travellers – there had been no official promise or deal yet the hotel suffers:

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As we can see expectations are increasingly formed in a comparative way with judgments based on the extras fellow travellers enjoyed. Shotter (2006) vividly describes how one sees through others' sets of eyes:

“Seeing with another’s words in mind can itself be a thoughtful, feelingful way of seeing, a way of seeing and thinking that brings one into a close and personal, living contact with one’s surroundings, with their subtle but mattering details”.

This is the *mediatized gaze from within* that is proposed as an extension to Urry’s mediated gaze; a gaze that allows people to see and think through other sets of eyes and minds and lets expectations take shape and move beyond what brochures and travel agents offer. In other words this is a different way of practicing reputation-taking. The mediatized gaze from within suggested here is informed by what fellow travellers’ see, yet it is facilitated and made possible because of the distinctive medium (UGC platform). It is thus direct and mediatized at the same time. Users enact hotels’ reputation from within, not as a distant conceptual entity (as the research participants in this study noted “they no longer have to travel blind”; they have an orientation beyond where to go, what to wear, or how to behave (see p. 141). Social media is presented as a place for taking these reputations, an alternative to official brochures, traditional media, authorities or the physical visit to the place. No matter whether we do not want to distinguish between the different enactments of travelling, we have to admit that social media has served as the catalyst to decide whether to physically visit the place or not – generating revenue for the hotel or not. The direct information from within that unfolds in its own right reveals purpose-specific information that momentarily defines formative reputation.

Users have enacted places and organizational reputations from within even before embarking on the journey; they have participated in how places are perceived. They have become listeners and contributors of what reputation was and what it would become according to their enactment. TripAdvisor has made the importance of users’ contribution explicit by sending them Newsletters with statistics of reviews’ popularity (see Figure 25). However, the implications of our reconceptualization of reputation-making as formative and ‘in process’ for pragmatic priorities within hotels has not yet become fully apparent. We therefore highlight the critical shift for

attention to practice demanded by the *becoming* of reputation-making: how hoteliers respond when the enactment of service falls short of expectation and promise.

## 6.5 Exemplifying the value of a processual framing through reputation-making

In this section, we will abstract a specific moment in the everyday practice of reputation-making, namely its healing. Building on the notion of change through non-change, we now give priority to the microscopic changes that reputation-making has gone through over time to further illustrate how it has been transformed yet remained the same. Chia (1999) has defined microscopic change: “Microscopic change takes place by adaptation, variations, restless expansion, and opportunistic conquests. Microscopic change reflects the actual becoming of things”. In their 2002 journal article, Tsoukas and Chia draw on this and develop the definition further: “such change occurs naturally, incrementally, and inexorably through “creep,” “slippage,” and drift” as well as natural “spread”. In what follows we look at the practices involved in reputation-making, the manifestation of which undergoes microscopic changes in the travel sector or put in other words is differently enacted.

When social media was first introduced it was believed that it would serve as a further channel of exposure, like the invention of the TV or the Internet. To a degree this was a fair assumption but when it came to UGC reviews hoteliers seemed to be losing control. Hotel managers might well have decided whether they wanted to invest in TV campaigns or not but could not interfere nor opt out if they did not wish to be listed on TripAdvisor or if they did not wish to be the object of protagonists on travel blogs. “It is obviously a medium which is here to stay, it’s not going to go away, we must learn to live with it and we must learn to manage the information which is posted on the site”, as a hotel manager in UK succinctly put it.

Even though hoteliers came to terms with the idea that they cannot escape from TripAdvisor, the appearance of negative comments about their businesses has always been a potential threat to reputation. However, many realized that even in cases of disappointment or dissatisfaction, which is usually associated with crises, the discourse that takes place online can potentially create positive impact if managed through reputation-making. Interestingly, UGC and social media have redefined our perception of the place where interactions occur (‘while the problem is being

resolved') and the way that issues are managed in the public may potentially serve as a generative mechanism for revenue and new customers over time. Social media has allowed organizations to turn the negative into positive in some cases, and as we will see in the next chapter these labels of positive and negative are by no means fixed.

Most hotels would never think of not responding to a negative letter or an email with a customer complaint. One key difference between complaints and negative comments published online on social media is that the complaint is not sealed in an envelope but open to everyone who cares to know. In this way, managers are encouraged to react to events as they unfold and to publish their actions; to report back to the audience in the same way they would report to their boss.

Reputation-making has therefore become signaled by practices that occur in front of whoever has the opportunity to witness the scene which prompts us to question once again *where* and *when* reputation takes place in a UGC-present hotel sector. A complaint about a hotel room with bad view used to remain between the guest and the receptionist or if the complaint was really serious the manager on duty could be involved in the discussion. Guests now are empowered with what social media is associated with: transparency and immediacy. A comment on Twitter can have as a result the resolution of the problem on the spot that a call at the reception would probably not. This happened to Mr. Horan, who Tweeted: "At the Orlando Marriott World Center for RIM WES 2010 [a technology conference]. But I have the crappiest room in the hotel." Front-desk employee Zachary Long saw Mr. Horan's comments while monitoring Twitter and went into damage-control mode. Mr. Long had a note of apology for the "current room situation" slipped under Mr. Horan's door and offered to move him to a pool-view room the next day. "It was on Twitter, so it could spread," Mr. Long says. "It was a complete shock" that Marriott saw the message and reacted, Mr. Horan says<sup>24</sup>. When there is a reference to the hotel name online it serves as the extension of the hotel, as if it were a signpost outside the premises with a message written on it by the customers. In a similar way to Twitter, user-generated reviews have become an integral part of practicing reputation-making.

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<sup>24</sup><http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704256304575320730977161348.html#project%3DSLIDESHOW08%26s%3DSB10001424052748704629804575325743631458302%26articleTabs%3Darticle>

Hotel managers participated in the study regularly start staff meetings with references to reviews that as we saw earlier have been systematized into reports or Excel files. Before they take the comments on board and act - or not - they decide whether they should reply to the reviews through the TripAdvisor “Management Response” option. This is a continuation of the discussion above about the two enactments of reputation-making that in this study are inseparable. Hotel managers can act and adapt their practices based on reviews and participate differently in the performative construction of reputation by addressing and responding to the review online.

What follows is part of a management response written on TripAdvisor by the hotel manager in Mexico, with whom we had a Skype interview and email interactions. As mentioned in the methodology, respondents have been selectively chosen prior to the interviews based on the engagement with UGC they demonstrate online. This manager besides monitoring the reviews on TripAdvisor (which he imports in an Excel file), actively responds to reviews and has managed to become very popular among TA users who refer to him on the TA fora. The researcher had observed this behavior prior to approaching him. Below follows part of his management response to a user’s review (the actual one is twice as long), where he takes the opportunity to inform guests and potential visitors about the updates and refurbishing, as if this were a press conference.

“We are very pleased that you enjoyed your stay with us, and I have made note of the points you mentioned and will take this opportunity to advise of some updates, as well as some plans which are expected during this year.

I have shared your comments regarding the buffets with our Chef and Food & Beverage manager to ensure a consistent quality product, experience and service...

As noted in some of my previous entries, we have a full replacement of all new mattresses as of late last year. These mattresses are a pillow-top hotel grade FIRM mattress. A hotel grade mattress is designed to withstand much more rigorous wear and tear and still provide the full support that one should have in a mattress. For someone who is used to or prefers a softer mattress, we may not be able to achieve the feeling of your personal bed, but we will try to make certain that you are comfortable.

Now onto some updates...

First of all, for those of you internet diehards, as I had mentioned on the Forums, I am now pleased to advise you that the project is up and running and we have WIFI service throughout the grounds of the hotel which provides service into the guest rooms – due to the concrete structure the signal may not reach into the bathrooms, however, if your that diehard, perhaps you need an additional vacation to your vacation...

For the guest convenience, we now have an ice machine on the middle of section 1 of the hotel; in the future we are considering other locations for ice machines to service guest needs...

We are in the process of completing the iron/ironing board project in every room. At one point we only had irons and boards to loan, however, by the time this update is posted online, the final shipment of irons should have arrived and will be placed in the room – if not immediately, shortly thereafter.

That's what I have to report at this point, and I trust that the information is helpful. Thanks for keeping us informed of your experiences in a way that is helping us to improve our product and service.

We look forward to having you back with us on your next getaway".  
General Manager

X HOTEL

TripAdvisor managers also refer to him in their presentations in specialist conferences, as an exemplar of how engagement can facilitate what they call service recovery and we regard constitutive of reputation-making. Instead of discussing with the unhappy guest about the solid mattress at the lobby of the hotel, he has become publicly accountable to the crowd. The practice has remained the same, as he may have changed the mattresses if customers have complained in front of the lobby while checking out. Part of reputation-making thus has become its performative instantiation as entangled with the other enactments, such as the replacement of the mattress per se. The Sales manager of TripAdvisor claims that the procedure is similar, 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 and the best way to overcome that, well I think a hotel is really the better 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”, TripAdvisor Sales Director advises.

TripAdvisor's manager thus maintains that reputation-making happens in a similar way to how it used to before the emergence of UGC on travel websites. At this point we would like to paraphrase an assumption by Nag et al. (2007: p.843) who note that “even though labels might remain the same, the adaptation of practices consistent with those labels can nonetheless facilitate changes in their meanings”, thus allowing the coexistence of sameness and change. In this study, we argue that what we are witnessing is a sector that has experienced transformations through microscopic changes by remaining the same. We have discussed how a change through non-change occurs and we have suggested that direct and conceptual dynamics have become more thoroughly entangled. In the next section, we consider the influence that this has had on a key business priority: performance. In so doing, we will connect the common technical usage of this term among business people with the more theoretical notion of performativity and propose that merging our understanding of them is critical for the effective enactment of reputation-making.

## **6.6 How a processual understanding of reputation-making supports a focus on performance and performativity**

The above sections have paved the way for our first response to the research question. The departure point of the current thesis was to explore how the emergence of UGC websites has transformed organizational reputation-making in the travel sector. During the study reputation has been seen through a process constitutive of ongoing and emergent practices. As we saw in a previous chapter, the tourism sector is believed to have moved through the emergence of the press, the Internet and UGC: “The hotel industry properties are much more concerned about their image than they used to be”, notes a travel expert and blogger. The phenomenon of reputation is in a constant process of open definition, a definition under construction or in process. The emergence of a dynamic platform has triggered an intensification of reputation-making practices and added an increased demand for learning about the unfolding technologies in play. Social media has intensified the engagement of all interested stakeholders within the constitution of reputation. Hoteliers are now asked to take active action, defend themselves and prepare for their next ‘battle’ if reviews are not favourable.

Building on the literature on reputation we highlighted its emergent nature and illustrated the impossibility of it being a possessed asset or a static organizational representation. The case study within TripAdvisor, as an illustration of the multiple identities of hotels as places, the approach of netnography and the systematic study of the literature along with the tenets of Process and Practice Theory have helped us to think of reputation as a phenomenon in constant movement: as reputation in the making. The question then arises: How does a non-change have consequences for the sector?

The construct of change through non-change that is proposed and analyzed here acknowledges the reconfiguration of practice and as respondents have noted, there is considerable entanglement with performance. Reputation-making can turn negative into positive and even though perceptions are neither black or white for everyone, at the end of the day there are indices, measures and revenue to be quantified as indications of whether strategies were effective. The chapter has denied the fixed labels and pushed against calls to see UGC reputation as a pristine, new or fundamentally original phenomenon. Yet there is evidence that performance is changing and will keep changing through the revised enactments of practices. We would argue that this is because, as Bjorkeng et al. (2009) maintain: “competence and practice are mutually dependent constructs, constantly negotiated through practicing”.

As we saw above, the hotel manager in Mexico was able to closely correlate UGC reviews with the booking rates and revenue. The higher the ranking the better the performance, as defined by the hotel’s goals. As we saw in his management response, he accomplishes reputation-making by being transparent about the corrective movements and practices. He both performs microscopic changes in the way service is delivered as well as in the way he advertises them by responding to reviews (both are enactments of reputation-making). The fact that under his management the TripAdvisor rankings have risen from 14 to 8 and became number one among families in the Los Cabos area, did influence booking rates. In 2010, the US hotels occupying the top positions on TripAdvisor reported a significant difference in the booking rates and conversion, according to TA Sales Director. Hostels too have been influenced by the reviews on Hostelworld.com with a direct impact on their occupancies. In this study, we have worked with hoteliers to

corroborate the claims of TA in practice and found that although direct cause and effect relationships are problematic at times, we can certainly say that closer relationships are forming.

The examples presented thus far in the dissertation are striking in terms of the influence that reviews have on performance as defined by the sector, an issue that we look at in the next chapter from a different angle. In this chapter we have proposed and developed formative reputation and have attempted to show how it is processually constituted or more precisely how it is constitutive of the configurations of people, processes and places rather than constituted by them as if they were diverse fixed entities. Before we move on to the process of legitimizing reputations we will summarize the main ideas analysed in the chapter and suggest implications for practice.

## 6.7 Conclusions

Part of the chapter's concern was to agree on a perception of reputation-making before problematizing whether and how it has been transformed in time. Reputation-making has been defined through arrested moments and practices that have been analysed throughout the chapter. We have claimed that the emergence of UGC websites and the entangled relations developed have introduced different ways practices are accomplished (see also table 18) but not the belief that reputation-making is fundamentally achieved by exceeding expectations through excellent service which has endured through time. By linking the Practice lens and the tenets of Process theory we have presented a reconceptualization of reputation, its enactment, and realization which challenges traditional methods resting on static terms and discrete measures.

We claimed that reputation-making is moving and is in a process of becoming rather than discovered anew. Whitehead notes that "...each becoming unfolds in a different manner, incorporates different elements from every other becoming" (Halewood and Michael 2008). In a similar vein organizational reputation-making has become what it *is* at a particular point in time through microscopic changes in everyday practices for hotel managers and experiences from within for travellers. We then went on to claim that the two different enactments of reputation – which might normally be

divided into the one experienced physically through practices and the other read through stories online - are inseparable, unfolding in their own right, illuminating the formativeness of reputation. This chapter has abstracted and focused on practices while the next chapter primarily highlights the intensification of relations characterizing the specific becoming of reputation-making.

It is argued that if we take these rather theoretical assumptions seriously they have important implications for hospitality managers. By focusing on the entangled relationship of the different enactments that are inseparable, we provide evidence of the necessity to treat formative reputation holistically on the micro-level and therefore encourage managers to adapt their practices accordingly. Managers can take advantage of the place of TripAdvisor and UGC to negotiate the tensions through reputation- remaking and to convert dissatisfied customers into potential guests who, based on how difficult situations are resolved, take the decision to make a reservation and physically visit the premises of the hotel. We show that change should not be considered as a new state that requires new models and rules but can be approached through a familiar disposition and adapted through practices. It is argued that by shifting to our conceptualization of formative reputation, performance becomes an ongoing accomplishment: enacted through practices that are manifested and shared in multiple ways.

In this way, it is suggested that travel is enacted through the intimate experience of fellow travellers: what we have termed the mediatized gaze from within. As Morrissey says: “A concept of the “other”, then, is fundamental to any narrated performative, for it is addressed to an addressee who is both outside the text, yet called into being through it” (2005). This extends Urry’s original idea of the mediated gaze in which the traveller is influenced by promotional one-way media such as television or radio. Actively gazing from within through UGC intensifies the entanglement of conceptual and direct experience. UGC is an ontological machine, yet a sight itself. People decide to physically travel due to its existence and influence, yet they already vicariously ‘travel’ by gazing at it, as it is a form of ‘place’ itself.

The analytical journey of the chapter is summarized in the table below:

Key points	Tenets of becoming
Reputation-making is defined through everyday practices.	We have abstracted and paused moments as these happen as part of the everyday practices.
<p>We look at the nature of transformation and in particular what we name ‘change through non-change’. How has reputation-making changed while remaining the same.</p> <p>On the one hand practices have not changed in principle –only the way they are accomplished has-, yet this had produced a different world.</p>	“Things are in the making”. By the time we look at states A and B both have moved and changed and therefore we are looking at something else. The fact that they have changed lies in the motion and movement and not in that they have been converted into different states. Thus we look at the movement.
<p>We propose that UGC has brought about different forms of knowing that allows people to see through others’ eyes.</p> <p>This realization opened up the discussion about a revised version of Urry’s mediated gaze from within.</p>	According to Process, knowledge from within –direct experience- does not differ from conceptual knowledge –about-. We saw how these have been reconsidered in the case of travel UGC.
We looked at reputation-making as part of healing reputation and the microscopic changes that are constitutive of it.	Microscopic change reflects the notion of becoming in that it focuses on what is happening between a problem’s exposure and its consequences.
Main idea of the chapter: The forming of reputation-making is always constituting and reconstituting itself: it is becoming per se, (Bjorkeng et al. 2009). Reputation-making is transforming processually in that transformation is manifested via everyday practices and microscopic changes. Formative reputation allows us to study the constitutive process through those practices and arrested moments that are essentially intensified via different forms of knowing. Key to understanding formative reputation has been the realization that the multiple enactments of reputation-making are tightly entangled and therefore have to be managed as such.	

**Table 20 Key points of the chapter and tenets of becoming**

In the discussion above, a silent assumption has been taken for granted: that reviews are honest and authentic. Although the epistemics of information clarifies the power of rumours irrespective of their accuracy, we have to look at unsubstantiated cases and verification mechanisms more closely. The focus of the next chapter takes up this challenge and focuses on how the relationships between reputation-making and legitimizing have intensified and with what consequences: hence exploring a further

enactment of the performative instantiation of reputation-making and -breaking.

## Chapter 7 The circle of (il)legitimacy and a revised agenda for reputation-making in the era of social media

### 7.1 Introduction

Imagine a world, where every book is unfinished and the reader is left to write the ending, where the audience can jump on the theatrical stage and change the plot of a play, and a lecture schedule can be organized by student popularity. These provocative examples are used to continue the discussion about how the emergent informal platforms involved in generating new forms of knowing are reconfiguring taken-for-granted institutionalized norms that we have previously regarded as formal and legitimate. The particular focus of the chapter is the way in which user-generated content places reputation-making and corporate legitimating in the front line of everyday organizational life. We trace how TripAdvisor, has developed from novel interloper to a routine and habitualized practice in the travel sector. In the previous chapter we abstracted practices as constitutive of reputation-making. It is this chapter where we will abstract different enactments of the same practices that happen to be online, having clarified in the previous chapters their inseparability. After having discussed the nature of transformation that social media brought about in reputation-making, the chapter aims to illustrate the process through which the establishment of these new organizational forms is upsetting the equilibrium of reputation-making and legitimating prompting organizational restructuring.

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 et al. 2003). Such certification contests are “social tests of products and organizations” (Rao 1994) that minimize uncertainty and establish reputational standing. Nevertheless, knowing generated by such authorized institutions oftentimes serves the role of keeping everyone satisfied, for example “the material-discursive practices of AA inspection are designed as far as possible to achieve reputational symmetry through a “win-win” dynamic” (Scott and Orlikowski

2012b), a dynamic that has created further discomfort among travellers seeking for candid information as we also saw in the previous chapters.

It is widely believed and discussed that reputation is one of the most critical organizational concerns. As discussed earlier, reputation is regarded as “a global impression reflecting the perception of a collective stakeholder group” (Deephouse 2000; Fombrun and Shanley 1990). How this collective stakeholder group is broken down into individual thoughts and impressions and then recollected once again into a macro-picture is an on-going process that manifests in multiple ways. In this chapter wishing to highlight the formativeness of reputation analyzed earlier, we reintroduce organizational reputation-making as a living process of composition in which a multiplicity of personal experiences, individual evaluations, institutional assessments and official review schemes are taken into account. We take the position that, far from being abstract rigid values, reputation and legitimacy are dynamically enacted (hence reputation-making and legitimating) and performed on an everyday basis by organizations in order to survive and flourish.

In what follows, we will integrate the literature on reputation presented earlier with legitimating in order to identify new challenges and tensions posed by social media. 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-making. Based on the empirical material and through the prism of Process Theory and becoming, we will propose “the circle of (il)legitimacy” -for the nature of the circle is to have no beginning or end– a circle through which legitimation and illegitimination are always in relation to each other, as a way of conceptualizing the current process of transformation in reputation-making in the travel sector.

## 7.2 Legitimacy in the context of reputation

The notion of legitimacy has its roots in ancient founding concepts and therefore unsurprisingly the literature associated with it can be traced through multiple fields across time; “the Latin root of the words legal, legitimate, and loyal is *lex-legis* which refers variously to the law, the right, the just, and the faithful” (Boddewyn 1995). The most cited definition of legitimacy is from Mark Suchman (1995), who describes it as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity

are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions”.

This definition notes first the perceptive nature of legitimacy and then the compliance to norms and values, dictated by an acceptable social system. Important emphasis is placed on the relationship between the organization and its context. As long as values, norms and behaviours are aligned we can speak of organizational legitimacy (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975). A common theme in most definitions of legitimacy are the social construction of values and an implication that the organization is situated in a preexisting context of institutionalized beliefs about what is correct and appropriate. In any given context there are boundary issues about what is ethical and desirable.

In the literature, both reputation and legitimacy are conceived of as assets and considerable effort is given to identifying the practices through which their value can be leveraged. Neilsen and Rao (1986) refer to the “legitimation process” that leads to a state of being legitimate and regard it as a “collective making of meaning”. In a later study, Rao (1994) emphasizes the constructed process of legitimacy and suggests that “legitimation consists of creating an account of an organization, embedding that account in a symbolic universe, and thereby endowing the account with social facticity” (DiMaggio 1991).

In other words, if legitimacy is adherence to an acceptable system, then legitimation is the procedure through which the organization justifies “its right to exist” (Maurer 1971: p.361). Parsons separated this process into legitimation and justification; in the first part, specific “value-standards” are established as a sanctioning feature of interaction whereas, in the second, these value-standards are associated with specific actions (1977: p.358). Therefore legitimation involves creating a system of compliance through which conformity can be achieved. It is not only an illustration that the organization has accepted prevailing norms, but also confirmation that the norms and the mechanism in place are legitimate. In other words, in order to evaluate the legitimacy of the epistemics of information we first have to evaluate it as a source of knowing.

As Zucker (1987) notes, “most studies use degree of control by the state, via law, regulation or resource flow, as the measure of the degree of institutionalization”.

Social media challenge the dominant norms of control by actively re-defining key roles associated with organizational perception management such as “organizational spokespersons”, “infomediaries” and “media gatekeepers”. Elsbach (2003) suggests that the role of organizational spokespersons is to influence audience’s perceptions irrespective of whether they officially belong to the organization by conveying or explaining “symbolic actions: verbal accounts, symbolic behaviours, display of physical markers”. Such influential opinionated groups of everyday people have opened up opportunities and have challenged the way organizational boundaries are perceived.

In the literature review chapter two key assumptions dominant in the reputation literature have been challenged: First, organizational settings consist of clear groups of internal and external stakeholders, whereby the first act and the latter shape reputations based upon those actions and decisions. And second the fact that clear distinctions among temporal states are assumed: past, present and future are well-defined points unproblematically chopped up in most definitions. Acceptable past behaviour means good present reputation and future financial growth. Scott (2003) has called for a reconceptualization of boundaries assumed to define outside and inside institutions: “Vital flows -resources, production systems, knowledge-transcend formal boundaries, and stimulate managers to reconsider who and what are ‘inside’ vs ‘outside’”. This has profound implications for the practice of organizational reputation-making, which we are discussing later in the chapter.

Organizations have realized the importance of social media in the construction of their image, reputation and legitimacy. McKinsey Global Survey (2009)<sup>25</sup> showed that “64% of the 1700 executives used Web 2.0 platforms internally, 56% to communicate with customers, and 40% to work with external partners or suppliers”. Igantius (2010) draws our attention to the way in which social media stimulates wider and more active participation of constituencies at a global scope and scale. As a consequence, for many organizations, “knowing what to do and how to do is less clear particularly as platforms, technologies, and social norms remain in flux” (Gallaugh and Ransbotham 2010). We claim that the presence of social media has

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<sup>25</sup>[http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Business\\_Technology/BT\\_Strategy/How\\_companies\\_are\\_benefiting\\_from\\_Web\\_20\\_McKinsey\\_Global\\_Survey\\_Results\\_2432](http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Business_Technology/BT_Strategy/How_companies_are_benefiting_from_Web_20_McKinsey_Global_Survey_Results_2432)

made the definition of legitimate practice in the travel sector more complex requiring a reformulation of the way that we are thinking about processes of legitimization. We have already discussed the nature of change in reputation-making, yet we have not touched upon how the temporary legitimacy of a place (with place we mean hotels with the broad meaning as analyzed in chapter five) is transformed. Having talked about the processual nature of change and what we have proposed as the change through ‘non change’, it is now time we acknowledged how a ‘non-change’ has implications when becoming comes to rest. What is the pragmatic enactment of reputation-breaking for hoteliers when they have to cope with the platform of TripAdvisor?

### **7.3 The assertion of the crowd in the professional lives of hoteliers**

As the reader is already familiar with the environment of TripAdvisor (covered in chapters four and six) the empirical focus of the chapter will be on the algorithm used on the website to rank the properties listed by members who also upload pictures and videos in order to share their travel experiences with the aim of helping others plan trips. TripAdvisor has appeared as a public forum 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. TripAdvisor maintains that because its reviews are provided by travellers around the world on a timely and gratis basis, the information that it provides is ‘pure, organic, fresh, global, and unbiased’ (see Appendix A).

TripAdvisor’s 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”<sup>26</sup>.

Hotels ranked number one in their area on TripAdvisor’s Popularity Index have found that their reservations have increased significantly (Scott and Orlowski 2009). So far we have mainly seen the positive impact of reviews on reputation and performance (reputation-making). However, hoteliers that receive negative reviews have found it difficult to manage their impact. Professionals in the travel sector have joined with hoteliers in protesting about the difficulty of managing unfair, malicious and/or fake reviews. The challenges and tensions that these issues create are illustrated below in a series of examples that for the purpose of better illustrating the argument are included here and not in the empirical chapter. As we will see the process of reputation-making is open and reputation standings contested; more of a continuum rather than a spectrum with two ends. Good or bad reputations do not preexist ready to be revealed through mechanisms but as we will claim are rather performatively created and negotiated.

There is general recognition that social media has revised the ways reputation-making is practiced, 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. One hotelier described how he discovered his hotel was on the Web 2.0 site as follows:,

“We had never heard of TripAdvisor, we had been here a year and a half. It was purely by accident that we came across it... Obviously, when you are new to the accommodation and hospitality industry you don’t think about it. You think you have got to get into all the books and everything else...As a result of going online, and checking sites that we should be on, I came across TripAdvisor and suddenly found that we had people making comments about us...”, (Hotel manager quoted in Scott and Orlowski 2010)

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<sup>27</sup>. Although this may sound straightforward and can turn negative into positive as was the case with the

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.breakingtravelnews.com/news/article/government-to-abandon-hotel-star-rating-system/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.TripAdvisor.com/pages/terms.html>

hotelier in Mexico, data shows that establishing the basis for a legitimate review is a highly contested issue and the consequences for sustainability are critical. The question is how do legitimization processes unfold in the era of social media, where everyone is potentially a publisher and content creator? How is the legal system in place responding to the phenomenon and what is the role of performativity in constructing legitimate enactments of reputations? We present a series of cases to illustrate these points beginning with the “Gumbo Limbo Disaster” (see Figure 27).

#### **REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT**

**Figure 27 Post by a reviewer on TripAdvisor**

This negative review, posted five years ago 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 claiming that strict controls are in place to ensure objective content. TripAdvisor’s Director of Communications Europe maintains:

“Fortunately 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”.

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. One businessman has organized a campaign with 50 other hotel owners against pseudonymous reviews<sup>28</sup> in order to protect the sector against illegitimate and fake reviews that damage reputation. Another hotelier, owner of the Western Hotel in St Ives in Cornwall, is one of many who have gone on record to publicly decry the way that reviews can “devastate small businesses<sup>29</sup>”.

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, “Restaurant 24 Grille in the Westin Book Cadillac Detroit hotel sued TripAdvisor in April 2009 in a Michigan state court for \$25,000”. 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<sup>30</sup>” 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<sup>31</sup>”. 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. In another example, a hotelier has decided to give up a B&B business that he has run for 30 years after a review was posted claiming that “his rooms were dirtier than a sewage works”.

It is not only negative comments and reviews that can frustrate hoteliers and restaurant owners but also the lists that TripAdvisor distributes on a regular basis as newsletters claiming to reveal the “worst” or “dirtiest” hotels. Many hotels recently listed on TripAdvisor’s list of “Dirtiest Hotels in the World<sup>32</sup>” plan to sue TripAdvisor. A hotel owner in Daytona Beach is furious at the website, as he believes it can easily be manipulated. “When they put someone on a list, you think

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2010/nov/08/TripAdvisor-slated-at-hospitality-lunch> (last accessed 2011)

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/article-1329129/TripAdvisor-faces-bad-review-backlash-hotel-restaurant-owners.html>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.feedblack.com/2010/09/judged-by-TripAdvisor/>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/72277f18-ca82-11df-a860-00144feab49a.html#axzz1709pl9ID>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.TripAdvisor.com/DirtyHotels>

they'd at least do an on-site inspection to verify what they're saying is true.<sup>33</sup>" 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 traveller reviews.

TripAdvisor has 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 are 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" (See Appendix C). All very strong assertions that walk 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 (see Figure 28).

#### **REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT**

**Figure 28 Newsletter sent by TA "Hotel Horror Stories"**

Such lists have a soap-opera-like, popular appeal that draws people to TripAdvisor but inevitably they have reputational impact. Although we did not track the ranking of the hotels on the list before this specific newsletter was sent out as we could not have access to such data prior to publication, we captured the ranking in November 2010 (approximately seven months after) and compared it to the ranking in April 2011. The results show a downward tendency in the TripAdvisor hotel rankings without implying any causal relationship or a measurable impact of the newsletter on the position of the hotels.

Many hotel managers accept that they have to come to terms with alternative platforms for reputation-making however TripAdvisor is more than an additional marketing channel, it throws hoteliers into a dynamic process of reputation-making.

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.wftv.com/news/26665059/detail.html>

Part of the problem is that the style in which traveller reviews communicate their experiences and attempt to ‘helpfully advise’ fellow travellers how to avoid similar unpleasantness is more colorful and descriptive than any management response could afford to be. For example:

**REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT**

Post by a TripAdvisor member

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

Yet TripAdvisor continues to publish a range of lists drawing together the best and worst of hotel reviews. For example, on a recent “Horror List” one review of a hotel in Las Vegas claims: “We had drunk people sleep right outside our room lying in the hallway. There was no security provided. We would not stay again no matter how good the deal”. A hotel in Beijing included on the “Horror List” has plummeted 225 positions (from 2537 out of 3093 to 2750). A review for this hotel (further highlighted by the newsletter that accompanied the list) claims “I watched the cleaning lady wash the inside of my toilet with the same rag she cleaned my sink and

countertop". The management of this hotel did not reply to the review or any other negative review despite falling to the bottom of the list of hotels in the area.

The procedure 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. "Lateral forms of accountability" (Stark 2009: p.19) are created as user-generated content is placed alongside legitimate content, formal accreditation schemes and information from hoteliers. In the end what and who is held to be legitimate remains a highly contested issue. The following review and management response illustrate this shift between official and unofficial.

"Double booking, dirty linen and Bed Bugs?!"

**REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT**

Post by a TripAdvisor member

And the response by the hotel manager and owner:

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As hotel managers wrestle to prove or disprove reviews, the dynamic nature of user-generated websites, such as TripAdvisor is challenging the notion of truth and the role of formal, professional authorities to give the final word. The Environmental Health Authority and the official report by Rentokill are held in uncomfortable tension with the word of a guest.

#### 7.4 Organizing a response to the reconfiguration of legitimacy

If we pause to remind ourselves of Suchman's (1995) definition of legitimacy - "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" – it comes as no surprise that hoteliers have resorted to formal restitution to counter the reputation-making challenge that has been building. A UK reputation management company, called KwikChex, known for dealing with online defamation issues, has played a central role in bringing TripAdvisor to court. On the sixth of September 2010 over 120 hotels – mostly from the UK and US – agreed to participate in the litigation against TripAdvisor. The speed at which hotels have signed up to this action is indicative, according to *The Guardian*<sup>34</sup>: on 9<sup>th</sup> September over 300 hotels had signed up with KwikChex; two days later this had increased to 400 hotels and restaurants; by 24<sup>th</sup> September the number exceeded 700 hotel, B&B and innkeepers. The current number applying to join KwikChex group is now over 800. Chris Emmins, Co-Founder, KwikChex.com, in a personal email containing a summary of the case mentioned that the company has had "over 3,000 requests for assistance in the last year from businesses and consumers about review fraud"<sup>35</sup>.

The action that KwikChex requires TripAdvisor to take includes<sup>36</sup>:

- "Insistence on the removal of serious allegations that are unverified and for which there is no evidence, or for which there is evidence that the comments are entirely false. These include. Food poisoning; Accusations of criminal acts; including theft, assault and racism; Misleading and malicious descriptions of the property.

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.tnooz.com/tag/kwikchex/>

<sup>35</sup> also published on <http://www.caterersearch.com/Articles/08/08/2011/339641/KwikChex-presents-its-findings-on-TripAdvisor-to-the.htm>

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.kwikchex.com/2010/08/online-defamation/>

- Compensation for businesses that have been singled out in TripAdvisor marketing activities, such as email and 'reports' that are misleading and substantially unrepresentative of the overall reputation of the property / business.
- Correction of rankings in cases where the information used to produce a ranking is incorrect, out of date or provably false".

KwikChex maintains that it is representing hotels that "are being seriously defamed by negative comments which range from food poisoning to allegations of theft and even assault by members of staff". More specifically "these include tens of thousands of legally defamatory comments, harassment, racism, bigotry, graphic accounts of sexual attacks, lewd and offensive language, drug taking, prostitution, personal insults against named individuals and hearsay". A senior representative of KwikChex says: "our estimate is that there are at least 27,000 legally defamatory comments on TripAdvisor, allegations that are false and should if necessary be tested in court"<sup>37</sup>. TripAdvisor's response to the issue is that "we do not comment on either threatened or pending litigation." TripAdvisor maintains that its terms of use clearly state that they have "royalty-free, perpetual, transferable, irrevocable and fully sublicensable right to...use, reproduce, modify, adapt, translate, distribute, publish, create derivative works from and publicly display" content posted by their members. However, they accept no responsibility for damages caused by this content.

## 7.5 The legitimization of reputation and its 'becoming'

The examples from the data described above illustrate the conflicts and dilemmas motivating the call to extend a process view of legitimization and reputation-making in the context of social media. 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 chapter was written. The advice of most reputation professionals is to engage with social media in order to turn the potential reputational "dead end" created by negative reviews into a more active, on-going and managed process. However, whether they choose to be proactive or decide not to engage – there is no opt out - hoteliers are involved with

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<sup>37</sup><http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/226085/Hotels-fury-at-fake-reviews-Hotels-fury-at-fake-reviews-#ixzz1JLGXdnpP>

TripAdvisor regardless. We term the processual view of reputation-making that we have developed to communicate these dynamics the “circle of (il)-legitimacy”.

The circle of (il)legitimacy provides insights into how processes of legitimating are transforming the travel sector. One important “becoming” for reputation-making in this sector is that the route to legitimacy for a hotel now involves passing through TripAdvisor whether hoteliers elect to recognize it or not. Previously hoteliers established their status through the formal channels of hotel recognition mechanisms such as accreditation schemes and public relations (e.g. magazine articles) supplemented with informal word of mouth by guests. For the most part, hoteliers had primary control over information released to the public about their hotel and could engage with publishers about content. TripAdvisor has built its reputation and standing in the travel sector by arguing that it plays an important role providing a means through which negative reviews confront the official marketing material from hotels. In the process, the hotel’s official claims are sometimes rendered illegitimate although from TripAdvisor’s perspective this is a consequence not an intention.

A central feature of the circle of (il)legitimacy is the way in which hoteliers are bound to prove the legitimacy of their reputation and establish the illegitimacy of a negative review. Although the legal cases above focus on specific instances, the challenge to hotels is an on-going process from which there is little rest or respite. Steve Kaufer, the founder of TripAdvisor, recently claimed that 21 reviews are posted on TripAdvisor every second. This dynamism forces hoteliers to design organizational strategies of continual vigilance, monitoring user-generated content in case it has implications for reputation-making (see chapter five for more on practices and strategies). These strategies and the changes that they bring to job descriptions have been pushed on the hospitality sector.

After initially rejecting TripAdvisor, most hoteliers recognize that now ‘Pandora’s box’ is open and they will have 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. Hotel managers are incorporating the task of checking their hotel on TripAdvisor as part of their everyday routine. Major hotel brands have established strategies designed to respond to potential legitimacy and

reputation crises triggered by TripAdvisor ranking and reviews. This is made more difficult by the sometimes arduous and circuitous process of redress offered by TripAdvisor and the claim that they are uncommunicative with hoteliers. In some cases, hotel managers and restaurant owners have resorted to detective work, in order to match guests with reviews and determine the authenticity of the claims being made. A restaurant owner confesses:

"...we were able to track back that they were the only table with non-resident diners on that particular time that could possibly have written that particular review. I mean, we're a small place, so it's quite easy to track back. And once I got the name, and I had a suspicious that they were part of a team, a management team of a local hotel from a national hotel group, and I actually managed to print off a photograph of one of the people who was at the table, then our restaurant staff recognized them. So we were able to put two and two together and make four quite easily. It does take a wee bit of detective work sometimes."

The paradox is that reviewers are not institutions such as the AA or Michelin but the guests that hotels serve. The capacity of guests to post reviews now folds them into processes of legitimating in a new way, either as partners boosting their reputational value or competitors promoting a rival view of the hotel. In order to survive and maintain their reputation hoteliers are implicitly forced to prove the illegitimacy of other actors.

The emergence of an informal platform whose owners refuse to adhere to the norms of professional hotel inspections and the standards of accreditation schemes is creating disequilibrium in this sector. In so doing, it is redefining what is temporarily legitimate. We would suggest that whereas the processual nature of a hotel's reputable standing over time is widely recognized - made or broken by practices constituting its performance - legitimacy has had a more stable status with recognized quality standards, star awards, and accreditation. The advent of social media has shaken the foundations of the professionally defined notion of legitimacy and transformed it into a more intensely dynamic process that we have abstracted and summed up as the circle of (il)legitimacy. The circle of (il)legitimacy owes a lot to the insights of Process Theory and becoming as reputation standings are transformed in a processual way, namely not from state A to state B but rather in a way that A and B are absorbed while in motion; what is left to see are temporary abstractions

from this motion that are made manifest through economic performance and algorithmic rankings; it is then when becoming comes to rest.

The empirical material suggests that a revised notion of legitimacy –rather legitimating- is being worked out on multiple levels. As we have noted, one of the defining characteristics of this more thoroughly processual and relational legitimacy is its dynamism. TripAdvisor has not only reconfigured the timing of reputation-making but also re-defined where it takes place or more precisely what place *becomes*. Part of the frustration among hoteliers is that 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 place. 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 room’ called TripAdvisor.

The study illustrates that the definition of what is temporarily legitimate or not depends on “place” as well as the efforts of the constituency involved. In their seminal book “Who controls the Internet”, Goldsmith and Wu (2006) include cases of jurisdictional ambiguities that the Internet has intensified. They draw attention to instances in which a website, such as Yahoo operating internationally encounters legal and ethical challenges. For example, whereas selling Nazi memorabilia in the US does not constitute an illegal action, this is not the case for France and Germany. In a landmark trial against Yahoo in 2000, one of the key issues that lawyers had to address was how national jurisdiction is interpreted in the online milieu. The French legal system demanded that Yahoo screen out French users and make specific content unavailable to them. One of the French lawyers involved emphasized “There is this naïve idea that the Internet changes everything. It doesn’t change everything. It doesn’t change the laws in France” (in Goldsmith and Wu 2006: p.2). Yahoo stood firm by their initial position that they would not change the content just because it does not comply with the legal system in every country they serve. “It is very difficult to do business if you have to wake up every day and say ‘OK, whose laws do I follow?’” said a vice president at Yahoo. “We have many countries and many laws and just one Internet,” (ibid). In January 2001 Yahoo had to surrender after “Judge Gomez warned the firm that it had until February 2001 to comply before facing fines of 100,000 francs (about \$13,000) per day” (ibid p.8). Similarly eBay

did not list any Nazi products in Germany to comply with the German laws, even though eBay is based in the US.

If we try to create a parallel between the Yahoo case and TripAdvisor we find ourselves in a very chaotic jurisdictional scene. The US and European law have different views regarding online defamation. In the US, the 1996 Communications Decency Act, the Speech Act, as well as Section 230 and the First Amendment protect website publishers to such a degree that is very difficult for hoteliers to fight against user-generated content. More specifically, Section 230 “provides immunity from liability for providers and users of an ‘interactive computer service’ who publish information provided by others...” as long as the defendant is the publisher and didn’t provide the content itself”. This “legal umbrella” explains why Restaurant 24 Grille in the Westin Book Cadillac Detroit hotel mentioned above eventually dropped the case. “A provision in the federal Communications Decency Act of 1996 gives “complete immunity” to TripAdvisor and other review sites for user comments posted on their websites in the USA<sup>38</sup>”. However, “...an attorney with the Manhattan firm Proskauer who specializes in technology issues, said situations similar to the TripAdvisor hotel “Horror List” and the newsletter that accompanied it could represent a “grey area” of the law<sup>39</sup>”. In the UK, defamation laws are strict and it is conceivable that negative feedback may bring both the publisher and the user who wrote the review or comment to court.

Current legal action by hoteliers reveals the depth of multi-jurisdictional challenges involving the Internet that are at stake in these processes of change. As the development of social media is ongoing, both formal and informal “netiquettes” are evolving which means it is not easy to identify when, where and how legal systems have influence in any given situation. Policies covering validation and attribution are various and changing within companies (see the development of Amazon’s Real Name™). The litigation against TripAdvisor is still pending and no closure has been reached at the time the chapter was written. As for October 2011 KwikChex had submitted its long report with 10 of thousands of defamatory reviews to both the

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<sup>38</sup> <http://travel.usatoday.com/hotels/post/2010/10/TripAdvisor-unsuccessfully-sued-by-detroit-hotel-restaurant/126347/1>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.tnooz.com/2010/09/06/news/legal-threat-against-TripAdvisor-includes-120-hotels-and-counting/>

Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the USA hoping to challenge TripAdvisor's immunity under Section 230 and the First Amendment, claiming that the website acts as a publisher and creator of information<sup>40</sup>.

On the one hand the pressure of taking action against defamation and on the other The Libel Reform Campaign, supported primarily by the English PEN (writers promoting free expression), the Index on Censorship (an organization campaigning for freedom of expression) and Sense About Science (a charitable trust that helps people make sense of medical and scientific issues), has urged the UK government to revise online defamation laws. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2012 the Queen announced in her speech a revision of the Defamation Bill. The aim of the revised Bill is to balance between imposing obligation for intermediaries, such as TripAdvisor in this context, to reveal users' identity and/ or remove suspicious content when necessary while also protecting free speech and publishers who act as intermediaries and host users' content. In this respect the Bill clarifies that "a statement is not defamatory unless its publication has caused or is likely to cause serious harm to the reputation of the claimant<sup>41</sup>". The justice secretary, Kenneth Clarke said:

Our proposed approach will mean that website operators have a defence against libel as long as they comply with a procedure to help identify the authors of allegedly defamatory material."

He added: "The government wants a libel regime for the internet that makes it possible for people to protect their reputations effectively but also ensures that information online can't be easily censored by casual threats of litigation against website operators<sup>42</sup>.

As long as intermediary publishers cooperate in resolving cases of defamation and therefore act as juries, they are more protected under the revised Bill. Furthermore, according to the Bill "the defendant does not have to prove that every word he or she published was true. He or she has to establish the "essential" or "substantial" truth of the sting of the libel". Therefore issues of what constitutes serious harm and what is

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<sup>40</sup> The source is a personal email from Chris Emmins, which then has been published online: <http://www.caterersearch.com/Articles/08/08/2011/339641/KwikChex-presents-its-findings-on-TripAdvisor-to-the.htm>

<sup>41</sup> These notes refer to the Defamation Bill as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012 [Bill 5]1DEFAMATION BILL EXPLANATORY NOTES

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/law/2012/jun/12/internet-trolls-bill-defamation-online>

held to be ‘essential’ with regards to the truth remain contested. What we can say until revised decisions are put into force is that the legal system – a key part of established legitimization processes – is on-going.

## 7.6 Conclusions and implications

In this chapter we have presented findings of reputation-breaking from the field study in TripAdvisor. At the center of our discussion are reviews published on the website that cross the line from welcome consumer input to defamatory, libelous or unsubstantiated and how travel businesses manage them. We have been particularly interested in exploring how new organizational forms, such as TripAdvisor have disrupted traditional reputation-making practices. In this vein we have proposed the “circle of (il)legitimacy” to further illustrate the entangled relationship between legitimacy and illegitimacy and the challenges that this brings.

The rapid growth of social media in the very dynamic sector of travel and hospitality has intensified a process of reconfiguring organizations and authorities. In this climate TripAdvisor has presented itself as part of a democratizing movement in which every traveller has the right to speak out and share their travel experiences. What began as a re-balancing process in which real travellers countered misleading marketing by hoteliers, rapidly evolved into a major form of unregulated crowd-sourcing that has challenged institutionalized accreditation schemes and official authorities.

The user-generated content generated on TripAdvisor’s website has transformed legitimacy into a highly contested issue with critical implications. Reviews - whose authenticity is sometimes debatable - have provided the basis for travellers to draw conclusions about hotels’ legitimacy and reputation. Based on our findings, we maintain that – in light of its growing status in the travel sector - the route to legitimacy for hoteliers necessarily entails relationships to and with TripAdvisor. Through illustrative examples we have noted the cyclical nature of legitimization processes and the ways in which actors are forced to prove the illegitimacy of other actors in order to rebuild their damaged reputation.

Although legitimacy and illegitimacy are usually presented as opposites, we have concluded that in the context of social media in the travel sector they are constitutive

of each other and locked together. The circle of (il)legitimacy aims to show the multiple reconfigurations through which reputation passes and the contested nature of this process. Reputable hoteliers who experience legitimization challenges to their businesses by reviewers are obliged to disprove reviews. In this climate reputation management companies, such as KwikChex, emerge out of necessity in a society where judge and jury keep changing roles. In this on-going cycle boundaries are redrawn, relationships re-defined and layers of complication are added to the process of legitimization.

The emergence of user-generated content and social media in general has brought about new kinds of knowing that has been intensified by ranking and rating platforms. This new type of knowing has gradually questioned institutionalized norms and created the need for revised organizational practices to emerge. Roles and responsibilities have been highly influenced by rankings on TripAdvisor. A new form of detective work has emerged among hoteliers as they attempt to identify situations referred to in anonymous reviews: who was the cleaner on duty that did not clean a stain on the carpet referred to by a guest? Based on the reviews, hotel managers have been received bonuses or been put on probation, while cleaners and receptionists have either been praised or lost their jobs.

Part of our attempt has been to analyze the reconfiguration of legitimacy and its implications for organizational reputation-making, as well as what our findings tell us about the constitution of change. We conclude that while existing research highlights the importance of “[u]nderstanding how and why organizations respond to changes in accreditation standards” (Casile and Davis-Blake 2002), we have attempted to move the discussion forward by bringing to the foreground what we named earlier change through ‘non-change’, which draws attention to a distinctive, complex entanglement of relationships and tensions.

One of the key issues in this emerging research terrain is the discussion about jurisdictional boundaries and where the right to free speech begins and ends. The chapter provides insights into the legal issues encountered on the Internet and the ways in which social media have further intensified them. This area will need further exploration once litigation - a defining boundary-making process – has been through the court system in the UK, France and Germany. However, for now, practitioners

and academics are charged with working out how revised practices of reputation management will be integrated into the “norms, values, beliefs” (Suchman 1995) that help us work out whether and who is accountable for what is ‘written’ online when those discourses have damaging consequences for organizational legitimacy.

So far we have seen the multiple enactments of place-making, which all are instantiations of practicing the travel experience and its becoming. We then tackled reputation-making through everyday practices which helped us better perceive reputation-making –breaking and -remaking. We have established the grounds to claim that there is a performative dimension of reputation-making, which has been intensified with the emergence of UGC. Earlier we talked about how we perceive processes: processes do not occur “within or between social entities”, yet processes “enact and re-enact social entities into existence” (Chia 1995). In this light, we began our analytical journey with a deep discussion on placeness and the assumption that the different enactments of place that are bound up with reputation-making are all interrelated and inseparable. We then turned our attention to show that practices and their performative nature are indeed not detached, but as this thesis proposes they are conceived as an emerging and tentative unity. It is formative reputation that captures the inseparability and brings to the fore the generative mechanism of process: Becoming.

## **Part IV**

### **Conclusions**

## Chapter 8 Conclusions

### 8.1 Introduction

This final chapter aims to bring together the conclusions drawn from the thesis. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section presents a synopsis of the thesis and in the course of the presentation it considers the insights gained from studying reputation-making from multiple perspectives (see Figure 29). The second section discusses the implications generated by the insights and systematizes them into methodological, empirical and theoretical. The final part focuses on the uncharted realms that could be pursued in future research, along with the limitations of the study.

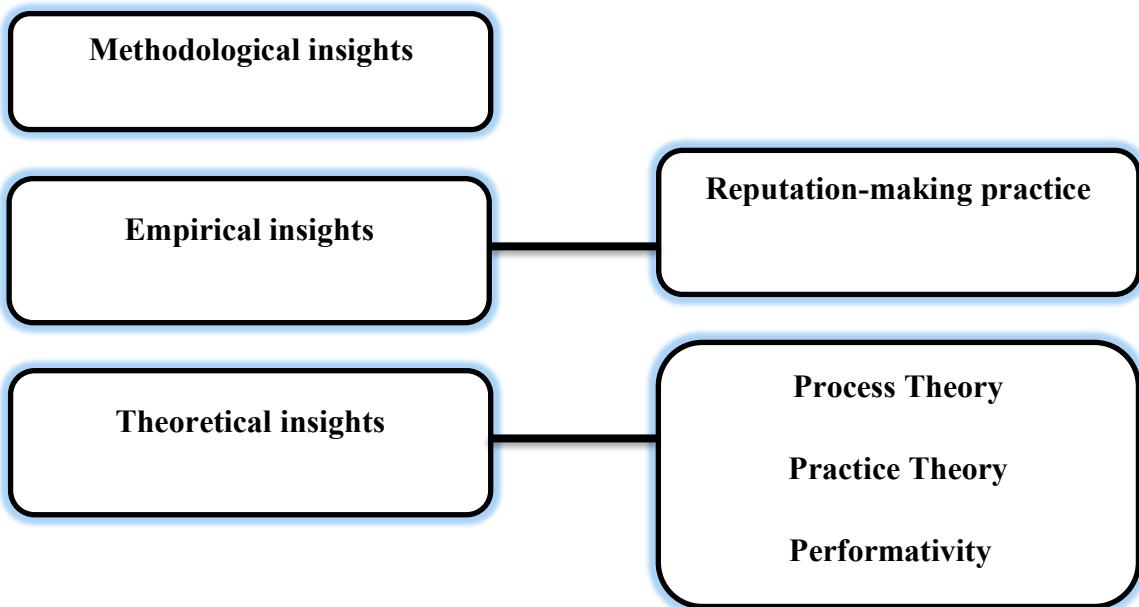


Figure 29 Thesis' insights

### 8.2 Synopsis of the thesis

This thesis has considered what happened to reputation-making when user-generated content websites emerged in the travel sector. Its particular concern has been to understand how the organization of UGC into forms of rankings and ratings has shaken the well-established principles of reputation-making practices. The overall premise is that if key assumptions underpinning rating and ranking mechanisms change, the enactment of travel itself reconfigures with important implications for

how, when and where temporary reputation is made. The theoretical approach adopted to support the study of inherent transformation that we argue characterizes the unfolding of reputation-making is developed from Process Theory. This establishes a ‘style of thinking’ that informs the analysis centering on the acknowledgement that phenomena are always in movement and flux (thus in *becoming*). While the main contribution of the thesis is to Process Theory, part of the contribution is to connect Practice Theory and Process Theory. In so doing, we draw upon ideas borrowed from practice-based theorists and we propose studying organizational change not as an exogenous shock, but rather as a transformation: a generative process unfolding over time.

In the course of this discussion the thesis has focused on reputation-making from the perspective of different literatures and therefore informed it in multiple ways. The literature review chapter examined key topic areas in order to provide both a background to the study and establish some informed expectations. It is argued that in prior research, the concept of reputation has been treated as an intangible asset, critical to business performance, largely managed in the travel sector through snap shot assessments and post-hoc crisis management. In mapping the development of travelling practice later in the thesis, we suggest that reputation evolved into a *sine qua non* and in so doing prepare the reader for the active role travellers play in the formation of reputation-making. Therefore reputation-making has been studied on the one hand from a management perspective yet on the other, as explained in the discussion, it has been reconceptualized as a process and an enactment of practice.

Methodologically, the study became possible through a multi-level research strategy comprised of a case study at the headquarters of the largest user-generated website, TripAdvisor, and of netnography, Kozinets’ (2002, 2010) reflective adaptation of Hine’s (2000) virtual ethnography. The multilevel research strategy employed, contributes to the discussion of how case studies can be supplemented by additional research strategies when the phenomenon is distributed online and multiple interest groups are constitutive of the unit of analysis. The contemporary research fields demand the researchers’ imagination and flexibility in designing the research strategy and in overcoming problems that inevitably arise. This thesis hopes to have contributed in this direction by suggesting ways to adapt to and make use of the online environment. It also delineates the subtle differences among tenets of online

ethnography (virtual ethnography and netnography) and conventional ethnography (see Table 7, pp. 86-87) thus justifying the decisions taken in the research journey. We also pointed out the importance of harmonizing the methodological choices with the theoretical preoccupations and we showed how Process Theory and *becoming* made a difference in terms of methodology. Future researchers are invited to adopt and further develop the ways online and offline methods are employed to study distributed phenomena with multiple identities.

The methodological insights are not limited to theoretical suggestions but also reflect upon the fieldwork experience and generate important implications for future research. Trials and tribulations have been documented, such as the issue of access offline and online. The nuances of the online space call for us to extend our deep consideration of ethical principles beyond ensuring informed consent and routine checks that the procedure is not harmful for the respondents. Issues of how respondents' privacy is defined and respected online, the nature and status of public online discourse, whether the informed consent of online communities' gatekeepers suffices to start studying them, flag only a few of the important considerations for future research agendas.

The empirical section was presented from multiple perspectives in order to communicate the complex process of laying out histories and mapping change when it is entangled with so many different stakeholders. The case study began by providing an account of how reputation-making practices have emerged alongside travel practices. The next part of the case study outlined the role of TripAdvisor and how hoteliers challenged its legitimacy. It described how the multiplicity of TripAdvisor has been enacted in everyday organizational practices, how hoteliers responded to the emergent challenges and how travellers revised their travel practices.

Insights from the case study and netnography are filtered through the tenets of process and contributed to an informed understanding of reputation-making. This is expressed in a term representing the core reconceptualization of reputation in the thesis: *formative* reputation. This term provides both explanatory power and sets an agenda for revising reputation-making practices, while it also stretches the implications that the disparity between reputation management and reputation-

making have. It serves as a definition which reminds us that in order to perceive reputation -temporarily- we have to grapple with its constitutive nature through organizational practices. UGC in travel has transformed the times, places, and ways in which organizational practices are made manifest not only due to its participatory and involving nature but also because of algorithmic configurations that are entangled with reputational rankings. Thinking and acting in terms of formative reputation means acknowledging the inseparability of practices from their performative enactment. This has implications for the notion of performativity, for reputation literature and practice and for our understanding of process theory. The following paragraphs are orientated towards these areas.

While scholars who study reputation (Fombrun, Shanley, Deephouse) have emphasized the active creation of mediated information as opposed to a neutral representation and communication they have not embraced the performative consequences that this entails. Elsewhere in the social sciences, scholars have developed our knowledge of performativity, beyond the linguistic context, as introduced by Austin. Butler (1993) took us through the performativity that happens through “recitation and repetition” of norms, Lyotard (1984) reminded us that the performativity of knowledge becomes “legitimate” because it has a “technical value”, and Knorr Cetina (2010) grounded the informational impact and its consequentiality with what she coined the ‘epistemics of information’. This latter term improved our understanding of performativity in the specific context of UGC by showing how information can initiate responses irrespective of its validity – *if we assume there is a mechanism to claim validity*. Focusing on the impact of rankings and ratings, Espeland and Sauder (2007) highlighted the “reactive” and “self-reinforcing behaviours” that these mechanisms generate. This study contributes an analysis of algorithmically-powered reputation-making processes to existing notions of performativity and illustrates the cyclical process of the multiple *becomings* that reputation passes through along the way (reputation in the making).

In treating the emergence of UGC (and therefore the accompanying algorithms) as part of the processual flow we come to appreciate the nature of transformation that emergence (‘becoming’) brings about. We suggested ‘change through non-change’ to highlight, the inseparability of practices from their performative manifestations (in this case rankings and ratings, performance and sustainability in the travel sector)

alongside the persistence of enduring organizational forms (such as reputation, management, hospitality, and travel) that as we claimed are always on the move and thus reputation-making, service delivering or experiencing, and travelling. It is suggested that achieving this more nuanced understanding of transformation through a process studies lens also progresses our understanding of practices within practice research. Organizational theorists like Lucy Suchman, Orlikowski, Feldman, Pentland, Pettigrew have emphasized the situatedness of practice and routines as opposed to more conventional assumptions of static stable structures. Algorithmically-powered performativity adds a further layer of complication and encourages us to question about where, when and how reputation-making manifest as it is (per)formatively enacted.

Such an intense theorization was not the original motivation of the research which for many focused on a mere ‘infotainment’ novelty. However, it was arrived at in a deeply grounded way in order to make sense of the data. How could we make account for hotelier anxiety, traveller delight, legal cases and TV shows focusing on travel UGC websites if they were so trivial? Moreover, why did hoteliers insist that nothing ‘new’ was going on when they were so evidently engaged in intense transformation? By the close of the study, we realized that no detached “UGC reputation management” textbook (“10 best practices to manage social media reputation”) would suffice because separating online practice from offline would be a serious mistake. Reconceptualizing reputation as a process, re-focuses management priorities and makes clear the ineffectiveness of remote *ad hoc* and *ex post* fixations. It is this impossibility that forces formative reputation onto the agenda; a call for revised management practices that favours process thinking and actively treats change as the norm and not as the disturbance of stability. With this in mind, implications for reputation-making were suggested in chapter six from a processual perspective. The realization that the performativity of reputation *becomes*, helped us acknowledge the contested nature of momentary instantiations. This was further illustrated in chapter seven through the construct of the ‘circle of (il)legitimacy which supported an exploration into the constitutive nature of temporary legitimacy and illegitimacy and the interdependencies of the (seemingly) two, implicated in the process hoteliers have to go through in order to establish their temporary legitimacy.

The study and documentation of formative reputation has been analytically possible through the use of abstractions. In temporarily decontextualizing the on-going phenomenon we claim to have gained some partial and space-specific access to it or to put it more precisely and to be consistent with the processual perspective, we did not gain access to a given phenomenon but rather recreated it. We acknowledge that in an effort to reinstate the integrity of process and becoming and to relocate these abstractions back to the flow, we inevitably interfere with them in various ways and thus we do not represent but recreate a different world. Our proposition to work out the consequences was informed by the multiplicity of spatial configurations because it enabled us to think holistically in terms of 'place'. In particular in chapter five we argue that the separation of code and space, although perhaps initially meaningful for reputation managers as each space affords unique characteristics, is an unhelpful bifurcation in the context of the practice of travelling. Travellers have developed a specific partiality of vision that is mediated through TripAdvisor, yet TripAdvisor website has become a 'sight' in its own right and has expanded the corporeal experience into imaginary spaces. From this perspective, it is argued that places (hotels) in the study are experienced as open, emergent and mobile and not static buildings that are represented online.

The theorization of hotels as fluid places always in-the-making when travellers visit and experience them in the multiple ways further supports the value of formative reputation for organizational practice. The ideas that human geography brings to the discussion and in particular Massey's 'throwntogetherness not only re-connect abstractions in considering the commonality of place (abandoning the dichotomy offline/online), but also inform our understanding of formative reputation. *Where* reputation-making takes place has had performative instantiations in the study, as discussed in chapter five. However, by using the example of the lobby and its multiple manifestations, we appreciated the formativeness through the performativity of placeness. In the end, formativeness in the travel sector is enacted though an algorithmically-powered process that has forced us appreciate a holistic placeness in everyday managing practice.

## 8.3 Insights of the thesis

In this section we summarize the insights this thesis hopes to make to the domain of study and the literature.

### 8.3.1 Empirical insights

In focusing on *reputation in the making* we proposed a working definition of reputation that centred upon formativeness to embrace how processes of reputation-making and breaking are constitutive of themselves rather than descriptive of the phenomenon of reputation formation. This assumption has opened up a new research stream to perceive reputation beyond the dominant traditions which treat it as an intangible asset or as a relational and socially constructed concept.

The thesis has major implications for reputation-making in practice. It is argued that UGC has rearranged organizational boundaries and challenged the dominant norms of control by actively re-defining key roles associated with organizational perception and reputation such as “organizational spokespersons”, “infomediaries” and “media gatekeepers”. Thinking in terms of the formativeness of reputation helps reputation professionals to realize that in treating reputation processually, there are no fixed organizational boundaries. So we are not witnessing a rearrangement of the boundaries but rather the acknowledgement that organizations – in this study hotels – are open places with multiple identities.

Drawing on the sociology of tourism, we proposed the *mediatized gaze from within* as an extension of Urry’s mediated gaze. Urry (1992) noted that “to gaze as a tourist is to insert oneself within a historical process”. We aimed to deconstruct this unfolding over time for practitioners and scholars interested in this domain as a way of coming to terms with the dynamic and paradoxical dimensions that are emerging. Sociologists of tourism are therefore invited to further elaborate the complex relationships with which algorithmically-powered phenomena, such as ranking and rating mechanisms in travel, are entangled.

### 8.3.2 Theoretical insights

The choice of Process Theory as the perspective through which to produce this analysis led to a reconceptualization of reputation-making, extended our

understanding of process and opened up further ways in which organizational and IS researchers might adopt it more actively.

The close treatment given to the processual nature of change here has grounded, elaborated and advanced a key principle of Process Theory. In the beginning of the thesis we described how Whitehead's theorization of processes enabled us to identify and engage in change to different degrees (analysis through arrested moments and situated generation of ideas respectively).

Our field study also enabled us to illustrate the notion of incremental microscopic changes as proposed by Tsoukas and Chia (2002) thus grounding Whitehead's proposal that each becoming unfolds in a different manner. What proved critical in order to address the research question was the search for a way to communicate the *consequentiality* that algorithmic rankings have on the one hand, without disrupting the flow of becoming on the other. This motivated us to bridge the prior tradition of process studies with current research on the practice lens. This enabled us to show how practices are not construed as entities that change but rather what changes is the ways they are made manifest or accomplished. This theoretical turn was captured in the construct *change through non-change* and it is hoped that organizational studies researchers will actively engage with this notion and develop it further.

In the thesis, the notion of becoming has played the central role. We drew upon process and with the metaphor of the river that flows while the flow continues when we decide to step into it, we elaborated how process and becoming are made manifest in the context of reputation-making and –breaking in the travel sector. Although acknowledging that this thesis is not the appropriate place to develop deep philosophical notions, we attempted to approach the consequentiality of transformations in a positively generative way. The ways we integrated this idea with ideas from Practice Theory, human geography (throwntogetherness) and performativity can be further delineated and illustrated with diverse empirical data.

### **8.3.3 Methodological insights**

The methodological insights can be summarized by noting the specificities of the challenges encountered. Kozinets has clarified the distinction between studying communities online and studying online communities. We have studied a distributed

unit of analysis with multiple identities and therefore we have approached it through a multi-level research design. Further work can be done in this direction and researchers are invited to adapt their methodological approaches according to the complexities that both the phenomena under study and the theoretical perspectives impose. In particular in the context of conducting research online, we have addressed ethical considerations and pragmatic issues that it is suggested need on-going revision.

#### **8.4 Limitations and further work**

As with any piece of research there are areas for improvement and limitations to the conduct of research.

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, even when access to TripAdvisor was gained, the researcher was only permitted to interview senior managers. Although this afforded a sound understanding of the case, a subtly different study might have emerged if content administrators and the IT department had participated in the study. As discussed in the methodology chapter, TripAdvisor was very careful in their choice of who would represent the company and therefore insights gained were sometimes lacking spontaneity and originality. However, other methods of data collection covered potential gaps in this regard.

A further complication arose due to the impermanence of Web 2.0 and social media – methodologically this made research more difficult, for instance web sources disappeared without trace, rankings and reviews were constantly being refreshed. Even as these lines are being written changes are occurring that may mean some points of analysis become outdated. Again, the researcher has made an effort to report results bearing this challenge in mind (taking screen shots, testing links to ensure they are still live etc.). However, despite these efforts to move beyond ephemerality this has not always been pragmatic.

A final point to mention is that the research undertaken has not explicitly considered the financial performance literature. Further research should take it more explicitly into account. It is noteworthy that economists are exploring the possibility of using panel data and social network analysis to identify relationships between UGC and

firm performance. However, this is methodologically and theoretically beyond the scope of this dissertation.

As an epilogue, I would like to remark on the *becoming* of this research itself. In the process of approaching the phenomenon I recreated it in many ways. What started as an IS research, developed into a study involving considerable theoretical work. While this has fascinated me, this philosophical richness may have led me into deeper waters than anticipated or was capable of swimming. This thesis was developed in the acknowledgement that it represents a call for further problematization and deeper examination of issues such as the nature of change, performativity, abstraction, throwntogetherness, generativity and other concepts discussed or implicated.

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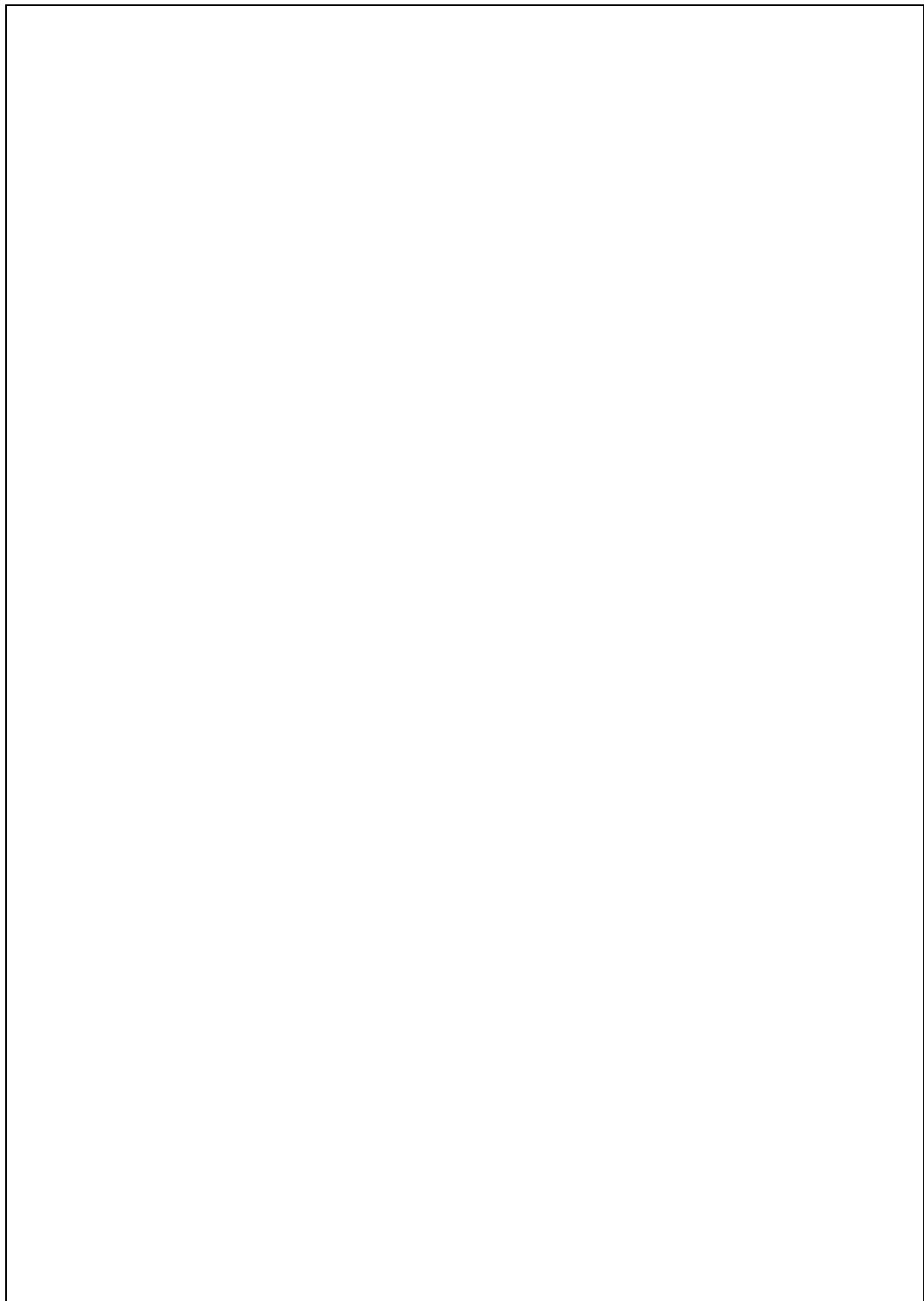
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**Appendix A:**

**TripAdvisor Popularity Index**

(Source: [http://www.tripadvisor.com/help/how\\_does\\_the\\_popularity\\_index\\_work](http://www.tripadvisor.com/help/how_does_the_popularity_index_work))

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TripAdvisor's websites have won hundreds awards worldwide among which winner of PC Magazine's Top 100 Web Sites, Forbes' Best of the Web, Third of the 10 best travel innovations of the past 10 years. (Budget Travel June 2008), Innovator of the year by U.S Travel Association. Number 79 of web 100.com. The press universally has dedicated much space to talk about TripAdvisor: Budget Travel, Boston Business Journal, the Boston Globe, Boston Herald, Calgary herald, The Charlotte Observer, Chicago Sun-Times, Chicago tribune, Financial Times, Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The News Tribune, New Media Age, New York Post, PC World, Travel + Leisure, Travel Weekly, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal are just a few examples. Remarkable also is that TripAdvisor's founders belong to the 5 most influential people in travel among: Sergey Brin and Larry Page, Google, Barry Diller, InterActive Corp/Expedia Brent Hoberman and Martha Lane-Fox, Lastminute.com, Stelios Haji-Ioannou, EasyJet and Steve Kaufer and Langley Steinert, TripAdvisor<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.travolution.co.uk/articles/2006/09/22/480/the-influential-ten-results.html>

## Appendix B:

### More on the practice of travelling and its relation to knowing

Knowledge has always played an integral role in the context of travelling. Adler (1989) notes this link: “since the time of Herodotus, who is sometimes described as the first tourist, travel has been explicitly pursued for the sake of knowledge”. Herodotus, Homer, Pausanias, Chateaubriand and even Grand Tourists were seeking their “inner truth” through their travels, they were challenging their boundaries and as Galani-Moutafi (2000) notes “they were constantly negotiating between the familiar and the unknown, between a here, a there, and an elsewhere”. Although the goal was inner knowledge, practical knowledge about the destination was needed to perform travelling and even though the tradeoff between familiarity and surprise keeps changing, all the travellers of history seek for a degree of reassurance. Along these lines, guidebooks, travel books, magazines and alternative travel press made their appearance to enlighten the route and to signify the transition from the unexplored to the familiar. In particular, the table below summarizes important milestones in the history of organized travelling.

---

Karl Baedekor was the first to publish his famous European guide book in 1839

---

In 1841 the enterprising Thomas Cook created organized profitable mass touring

---

The first railway station, designed by George Townsend Andrews, opened in 1841 in the historic city of York in the UK

---

In 1847 timetables were published in the Continental Railway Guide

---

In 1855 Napoleon III hosted a successful international fair (The Paris Exposition)

---

**Table 21 Milestones in the history of organized travelling (Based upon Brodsky-Porges 1981)**

Whereas travel books presented information in a romantic, autobiographical way, guidebooks assumed the status of being “factual” (Dann 1999). Buzard (1993: pp.48-76) is more enlightening: “a guidebook ...is there to rationalize and bring together the disparities of the tourism infrastructure, to help, advise and warn tourists, to steer them through the morass of alien lifeways” (in *ibid*). On the other hand, as Wheeler

(1986) puts it, “the subject of the travel book is the essence of “being there”, portraying place, people, events and the journey’s progress”, and he goes on, “while vividness is primary, the travel book is also dynamic. The traveller arrives, leaves, keeps moving by boat, camel, horse, truck or on foot. The traveler continually notes the date and how many weeks or months have passed since he left”. Wheeler’s original description of the travel book as a factual narrative with a beginning and an end - but mostly a middle - refers to the printed, tangible version. However this endless “middle” of impersonal facts about places and traditions might be said to have triggered the emergence of a phenomenon: the rise of a crowd willing to offer up their personal opinion. The challenge of contributing to the practice of informing and the complications that can arise is not new as the quotation below illustrates. However in this dissertation we have been charged with identifying the contemporary online equivalent of these trials and tribulations:

“It had seemed simple, before I set out, to write a travel book, but when I returned and was faced with my material I had a moment of despair and wished to abandon the project. A diary written in pencil with increasing fatigue and running to less than eighty quarto pages of a loose-leaf notebook, the piece of paper on which I kept the accounts of my carriers' advances..., a few illiterate notes from...the District Commissioner...and...the Commander of the Liberian Frontier Force, some political literature from Monrovia, a selection of Liberian newspapers...a number of photographs taken with an old vest-pocket Kodak, and memories, memories chiefly of rats, of frustration, and of a deeper boredom on the long forest trek than I had ever experienced before-how was I, out of all this, to make a book? But I had already spent on the journey the three hundred and fifty pounds which my publishers had advanced to me, and I could earn no more until the book was written”.

(Graham Greene 1980: pp.49-50).

The ethical dilemmas faced by Graham Green decades ago resonate with confessionalists by research participants in this study in which respondents describe how professional travel writers were sponsored and obliged to review a hotel and the hotel management and staff treated them as royalty. How could they write the whole truth about the hotel if despite this additional targeted hospitality their experience was negative? In this context, the popular rise of “unbiased” and “organic” reviews by everyday travellers has been presented as the antidote. As we have seen, no knowledge claim can be regarded as neutral.

**Appendix C:**

**Horror list Reviews as published on TripAdvisor and links of which have been included in a Newsletter sent by TripAdvisor**

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