How user-generated content (UGC) on TripAdvisor is affecting the decision-making process of the leisure traveler

Emese Tóth
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Thesis Consultant: Pinke-Sziva Ivett
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1. Introduction

In today’s globalized world we are all increasingly interconnected, and the internet plays a major role in this phenomenon. According to Internet World Stats (2019), 55% percent of the population of the world has internet access. If we look at the last 9 years, the share of the world’s population who has this access increased with approximately 1000%. According to Berger (2013), this has caused a big difference in the way people communicate with each other and greatly influenced human behavior. The nature of how we communicate has changed to a predominantly written form of communication.

In previous times, the consumers were always the passive actors when it came to communication between them and businesses. However, today they are very much active, leaving product reviews, and even creating ads. Since they have a platform where they can broadcast, they have a chance to deliver their message to a bigger crowd. This causes the customer to have the power and provide advice to each other regarding purchase decisions. (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008.) Because the internet allowed customers to be more empowered, conventional marketing habits were shaken. This meant that they had more control, they were able to participate in the communication instead of being passive partakers, and furthermore, they obtained a level of awareness like never before. (Surovaya, 2014.) The company does not have the sole control over the message anymore. (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008.)

Because of these above-mentioned new trends, I have found it relevant to choose the research topic of user-generated content (UGC).

According to research, 86% of people asked from Generation Y said that user-generated content was a valuable hint about the strength of the brand and quality. Sixty-eight percent of people surveyed who were also users of social media answered that they are influenced in their buying decisions by content shared on social media. The people asked about this were 18 to 24 years old. This shows how UGC is a powerful thing and a relevant topic of research for thesis work. (Gallegos, 2016)
My research question is: How user-generated content (UGC) on TripAdvisor is affecting the decision-making process of the leisure traveler.

I have identified seven sub-questions to my research question. All these sub-questions will result in answering the main research question of the thesis. Sub questions include:

- Do consumers consider UGC in their decision-making?
  - **Sub-question 1**: How important is UGC when making a decision?
  - **Sub-question 2**: In which stages of decision-making process does UGC affect consumers more?
- In what specific ways UGC on TripAdvisor is influencing travel purchase decisions?
  - **Sub-question 3**: Do they prefer UGC to marketer generated content (MGC)?
  - **Sub-question 4**: Do they prefer written reviews to visual content?
  - **Sub-question 5**: Do they consider positive or negative reviews more?
  - **Sub-question 6**: How do consumers participate in UGC creation? What are the possible motivations behind participation?
  - **Sub-question 7**: Do they consider the person behind the created content? Does it affect credibility of the post/review?

In my thesis, I will include the UGC phenomenon and definitions like prosumption, co-creation, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). I will examine the effects of user-generated content on both the consumer and corporate side. I will look at the travel industry as a whole, how consumers behave and how they make decisions when they are purchasing travel products. Finally yet importantly, I will highlight the importance of TripAdvisor and how it can be utilized in tourism marketing.

My chosen primary research method to look into the decision making of leisure travelers will be through focus group interview. I also chose to use an online social listening tool, Senteone that will provide extra information about online content related to TripAdvisor. These findings will complement the results I will have from the focus group interview and give us extra insight about the online conversation surrounding the brand. I have the
aim of finding out how people are affected by user-generated content and how they utilize it on the website.

Before the analysis of the primary research result, the “Elaboration” part is included in the thesis. The elaboration is only an overview of the responses, structured along the framework of the focus group interview. A more in-depth analysis focused on identifying underlying motives, patterns and conclusive remarks will follow the elaboration part.

2. User-generated content related concepts

2.1. Prosumption:

The separation between producers and consumers is not as easy as before. In previous studies and models, researchers have isolated production from consumption and learning from doing. However today, if one individual would be let’s say reading an article, while scrolling and clicking on some link, this individual would be doing all four things at the same time. This shows how in today’s ICT space it becomes virtually impossible to separate production from the consumption of information. (Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau, 2008.)

This above-mentioned concept is a new system called prosumption. (Surovaya, 2014.) Prosumption is also called the new model of capitalism. (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) The phrase “prosumption” was first introduced in the book called The Third Wave, written by Alvin Toffler in 1980. Later when people had access to the internet, more related notions appeared. The definition of prosumption, as it was used more and more over time, was expanded and became more obscure. It was used as a “synonym for user-led content creation, without specific reference to Toffler or other scholars”. (Bruns, 2016)

The individual engaging in prosumption is a “prosumer” (Bruns, 2016) The most important things that motivate consumers to be a prosumer: it takes a small amount of effort and limited time, you only need the most basic skill set, and last but not least it saves a substantial amount of cost. (Surovaya, 2014.) With prosumption there is a possibility to always generate more innovative ideas and to attain more profits while
decreasing the amount paid for research and development. Moreover, there is a greater possibility for rewarding innovation, since the consumers determine the needs directly. With this in mind, firms can look at prosumption as a possible competitive advantage. (Wolny, n.d.)

In the era of prosumers, it is more complicated and difficult to control consumer behavior, and they are more likely to be resisting attempts to control them. There is also the question of exploitation: it is not clear-cut whether the fact that a prosumer is not paid for the work done is exploitation or not. (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) For this reason these concepts were widely criticized because it was believed they were encouraging business models where labor was unpaid, consequently, they were promoting exploitation. (Bruns, 2016)

The emergence of prosumption shows that there is an increasing variety of needs. One reason people shifted toward prosumption is that they can satisfy these growing needs as well as they are able to create better goods that are more suited to these growing needs. Good examples of prosumption behavior are planning and booking trips through online travel agencies or to assemble IKEA furniture. User-generated content is also one form of prosumption. In this concept, jurisdiction is not regulated by official hierarchy, but rather by the ability and competence of the individuals. These inputs are not created to be copyrighted but to be shared and distributed via the network. (Surovaya, 2014.)

Now when the prosumers have the power and companies have little control, firms are more prone to just standing back, getting out of the way and taking a passive stance. The logic behind is that if they were to try to seek control over prosumers, the quality of their contribution would definitely be reduced because the quality can be attributed to the prosumers’ creative freedom. (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010)

2.2. Definition of UGC

In the next few paragraphs, I will list different definitions of user-generated content in the literature, and then I will make my own conclusion of what is my own definition of UGC based on my academic research.
User-generated content is a form of accumulated consumer creativity. (Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau, 2008.)

To call something user-generated content, the content should be aimed at mutually known and recognized brands. Brands are “the collective possessions in the minds of multiple constituents”. User-generated content is not effective until they are collectively publicized with the help of the media. So according to this, any collectively publicized content that was created by a consumer, and whose topic is a mutually known and recognized brand, can be called user-generated content. (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008.)

According to Axel Bruns (2016), it is an expression covers a broad collection of different media and the innovative content types that were generated by an individual or a group of users. It is important to mention in this definition that these users had to have been working outside of the traditional professional setting. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in a 2007 publication attempted to give a definition for the “participative web”. In this definition, they gave three criteria for content to be called UGC, and they are the following: firstly, this content needs to be accessible to the public, second, it has to show a level of creativity, and thirdly as already mentioned above, has to be made by users working outside of professional setting.

According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (n.d.), user-generated content is something that had to have been produced by sole users or groups of people, and this content has to have the power to generate customer engagement.

This term was also defined as any sort of content that was created and published by people who were not paid for this creation. To better define this, they use the word “fans”. It is also important to mention that it can refer to any type of content (words, images, videos, etc.) that was published about a brand. (Gallegos, 2016)

Based on these definitions, my interpretation of UGC is that it is any form of content created and published by an individual or group of people that was created voluntarily in a non-professional setting and it is aimed at any publicly recognized brand.
2.3. Co-creation:

When the distinctive line between consumer and producer is not as clear, there will be a whole reconstruction of the value chain of production. The intention to create a partnership in production will increase. This is also called co-creation of value. When this partnership is created, they come together in all kinds of productive, innovative or creative activities. (Surovaya, 2014.)

In 1986, Kotler for the first time included co-creation and co-production as a term in the literature. Despite the early appearance, they only got more attention from marketing experts after 2000. (Terblance, 2014) However, these experts from diverse fields of work adopted the term co-creation in various different ways. Because of that, it is not very clear what the precise definition is. (Koning, Crul and Wever, 2016.) According to the Business Dictionary (2019) co-creation is that it is a strategy concentrating on buyer participation and respective relationships that are interactive and provide an experience. According to Ind (2012), co-creation can be either an option for research tool or another method for creating value. We can also call this process the “participatory design” which is based on the idea that if companies would like to design a product or service consumers will love, they should include these customers in the design process.

In order for co-creation to be successfully executed, there needs to be innovation. This kind of content creation is a kind of “peer production”, which means that the work is completely decentralized. Normally work participation can be related to some kind of monetary gain, but in this case, this is not applicable. (Surovaya, 2014)

The act of participation in co-creating activities yields different kinds of benefits for consumers including, for example, new skills or being part of an innovative community. They can also enjoy self-expression and other kinds if psychological benefits. (Etgar, 2007) They can also profit from self-development by utilizing the “group genius” that comes from the different interactions through the network and will result in newly gained perspectives. (Ind, 2012)

Researchers often focus on consumer behavior that result in creating different brand communities. These communities have huge power to build and foster brand
relationships. These communities can provide a platform for co-creation. (O’Hern and Rindfleisch 2010) In the next figure, we will see the classification of the four different types of online creative consumer communities. The distinctive line between each category is not so clear-cut. Overlapping can be possible, as well as one community changing into another form with time. (Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau, 2008.)

Figure 1: Classification of online creative consumer crowds

Co-creation is a not very well organized process, often asymmetric and even chaotic. The contribution of different parties in the process is rarely equivalent. Companies have supervision over the environment in which consumers create, but they do not really have a say in the way they operate in this environment. (Surovaya, 2014.) In this concept, companies are no longer in the position of dominance. They rather focus on how they can facilitate from a stance of equality. (Ind, 2012)

2.4. Electronic Word-of-Mouth:

Classical advertising mostly a one-way type of communication, which was greatly non-personal since it was carefully constructed and paid for by the company itself, and was broadcasted to a specific target market with the help of media. The motive behind
classical advertising was to give information, exert influence or make people remember a certain message. (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008.)

The World Wide Web made it easy for people to publish their own online data and allows them to share through social media. The emergence of social media changed classical advertising and the way we communicate with each other. Traditional word-of-mouth changed into electronic word-of-mouth and allowed people to share their recommendations with online peers. (Kennel and Rushton, 2015) Word-of-Mouth (WOM) is a spoken form of communication that happens between two people (namely between a communicator and a receiver). (Buttle, 1998) Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) is the adaptation of WOM in today’s technology driven society. (Kaijasilta, 2013)

eWOM is any comment published for everyone to see on the internet, about a brand, product or service. This remark can be either positive or negative in nature. (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2004) This phenomenon is very dynamic in the way people are transferring information about their opinions and experiences. (Kaijasilta, 2013) eWOM is distinctive from conventional WOM in the following ways: it is happening on a much bigger scale; it presents companies with an opportunity to keep an eye on their operation and quality reviews; and last but not least, not being aware of who is posting the message makes it difficult to fully understand subjective information. (Arsal, 2008) In the following figure, you can see the defining elements of electronic Word-of-Mouth.

According to Kaijasilta (2013) the basic elements defining eWOM are the following:
- it is opinion sharing between consumers;
- opinion leaders are present;
- it is shared via several platforms;
- network based;
- directed to multiple people;
- there are no time or location constraints;
- it is possible to be anonymous;
- very challenging to detect credibility
- it is indeed present is buying decisions.
Motives for participating in eWOM can be very diverse. That motivation can be for example the desire to be involved with a certain brand, having concern for others, or wanting to help the company. People can search for or post online content because they want to seek/provide help for purchase decisions. (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2004) With so many available choices, it is more difficult than ever to make a purchase decision. That is why people like to turn to their peers for advice. This way eWOM is aiding customers to make an informed decision. (Naz, 2014) Motivations can also be negative in nature, for example posting about a bad experience out of vengeance. (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2004)

In the next figure, we can see how the traditional elements of communication appear in the case of eWOM and how they relate to each other. We can observe that in the case of one communicator, there are multiple receivers, and all actors are a part of a very connected network.

Figure 2: Elements of communication in eWOM

There are different factors that influence the different elements of eWOM communication. In the next table, I have made a summary of the most important factors that can have an influence during the consumer’s decision-making process.

We can see that when it comes to the image of communicator, source credibility is a very important determining factor. Whether they will be seen as credible, it is the question of their trustworthiness and previous experience/expertise. As for the stimulus, the quality of the argument is the most important aspect to consider. When the stimulus reaches the
receiver, it will be very important what their attitude is toward the communicator and the stimulus. In the end, these determining factors will result in one of the following responses we can see in the table. (Mitev and Markos-Kujbus, 2013)

### Table 1: Influencing factors of the four basic elements of communication in eWOM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INFLUENCING FACTORS IN EWOM</th>
<th>COMMUNICATOR</th>
<th>STIMULUS</th>
<th>RECEIVER</th>
<th>RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source credibility</td>
<td>Argument quality</td>
<td>Former impressions</td>
<td>Purchase intention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Disconfirming information</td>
<td>Cognitive personalization</td>
<td>Information adoption</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Valence</td>
<td>Skepticism</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophily</td>
<td>Type of site</td>
<td>Homophily</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: own elaboration, based on Cheung and Thadani, 2010.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONCEPT</th>
<th>ELEMENTS</th>
<th>REFERENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prosumption</td>
<td>• Production, consumption, learning and doing can be done at the same time</td>
<td>• Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• User-led content creation</td>
<td>• Bruns, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Prosumers help to attain more profits by decreasing the amount of costly</td>
<td>• Wolny, n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>research</td>
<td>• Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Difficult to control consumer behavior</td>
<td>• Surovaya, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• User-generated content is one form of prosumption</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User-generated content</td>
<td>• Content published about a collectively recognized brand</td>
<td>• Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Contains creative elements</td>
<td>• Bruns, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Happens outside of the professional setting</td>
<td>• Interactive Advertising Bureau, n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Created by consumers thus has power to generate customer engagement</td>
<td>• Gallegos, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Labor is not paid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-creation</td>
<td>• Business strategy concentrating on buyer participation</td>
<td>• Business Dictionary, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Method for creating value</td>
<td>• Ind, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Value created by decentralized “peer production”</td>
<td>• Surovaya, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Online creative consumer communities created based on innovation</td>
<td>• Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>concentration and orientation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eWOM</td>
<td>• Modern day WOM</td>
<td>• Kaijasilta, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Any comment published on the internet about a brand</td>
<td>• Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can be anonymous and it reaches a large audience</td>
<td>• Arsal, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• People want to seek/provide help and advice in purchase decision</td>
<td>• Naz, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Important factors in eWOM communication: credibility, expertise,</td>
<td>• Cheung and Thadani 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>argument quality and attitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Own elaboration)
3. Effects of UGC

3.1. Effects of UGC on companies

Because the “digital prosumer” obtained a remarkable amount of power, it is a really good question who really has control over brand image and communications. Some researchers stated, “The era of a corporation controlling its brand and image is over”. (Surovaya, 2014.) Despite of loss of control, companies can still choose how to react to and how to manage consumer-generated content and advertisement. The firm can choose to be active or passive, and they can choose a negative or positive attitude in their reaction to UGC. (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008.)

Figure 3: Possible strategies for management to facilitate UGC

The growth of consumer-generated content is both a challenge, but can be a great opportunity. Different messages from consumers can display their love, but hate as well. This means that a very meticulously designed brand image can be ruined. This comes from the logic that an image can make but can also break a brand. We also have to mention...
in this section the phenomenon of “subvertising”. It is a customer created ad, that is aiming to make a joke out of commercials, or it can be an anti-advertising opposing big enterprises. (Surovaya, 2014.) Companies can use this phenomenon to their advantage with the adoption of stealth marketing. This marketing tool uses the concept of peer-to-peer recommendation and eWOM. The goal here is to build buzz among consumers so they distribute the message among each other. (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008.)

The collective creativity that comes with UGC means that during social interactions new ideas of one individual generate different perceptions and interpretations for others. If we have more individuals from a variety of backgrounds, ideas that are more diverse are generated. What consumers do online are giving feedback to businesses through facilitating eWOM and advanced tactics for accumulating comments that are valuable. (Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau, 2008.) While adapting to the new empowered version of customers, it was necessary for companies to develop tools that allowed them to create personalized and mass-customized products, because customers became more critical and demanded more quality from the products. (Surovaya, 2014.)

3.2. Effects of UGC on consumers

Buyers are now constructing their own online participation and experiences. (Bonhomme, Christodoulides, and Jevons, 2010.) On the internet many people have the perception that they are in a safe, non-threatening space. This feeling allows them to feel more empowered. This sense of empowerment was created by other factors as well, namely the freedom to master and use new technologies. (Surovaya, 2014)

Because they feel safe and empowered, it increases their trust as well. (Surovaya, 2014.) According to research, approximately 67% of customers said that they thought UGC was more attractive for them than marketer-generated content (MGC). (Irvine, 2017) The trust is stronger toward UGC because people suppose that their peers will speak more truthfully, and be willing to reveal the negative aspects of a product or service. They feel UGC is more credible than MGC. (Bahtar and Muda, 2016)

UGC is a potential tool for users to communicate their creative ideas. To have a platform where they can express themselves is an important way to make the brand develop into
an essential component of self-concept. A platform where they communicate ideas also makes them feel like they are a part of a community. (Bonhomme, Christodoulides, and Jevons, 2010.)

Individuals often count on their peers for advice when it comes to evaluating options for purchase. They would like to avoid distortion of information. (Maksimova, 2018)

According to a research conducted by Ipsos and TurnTo, 90% of consumers admit that UGC was an important factor in their buying decision journey. (Irvine, 2017)

Recently there is an increase in tendency for personalization of products and services. This called for a growing contribution from customers especially in the design, production, technical and commercial processes. (Bruns, 2016)

Table 3: Effects of user-generated content summary table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EFFECTS OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT SUMMARY TABLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>On companies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does not fully control brand image anymore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• They have to come up with new strategies in order to be able to manage UGC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Can be a great opportunity to monitor consumer opinions and create buzz around the brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Can be a challenge (subvertising) – image can be ruined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• New source of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• More personalization is needed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Own elaboration – summary table of chapter)
4. Travel trends and the role of TripAdvisor

4.1. Overview of travel industry trends

With numerous recent trends in the industry of tourism, it is safe to say that in the next few years big changes will occur. The new trends include the following: sustainability, demographics, technology, or global travel and consumer preferences. (Papakonstantinou, 2016) The expansion in the industry of tourism is faster than the GDP growth of the world. The entire input of tourism in world GDP before 2016 was approximately equal to the combined GDP of Australia, Canada, France and South Korea. This amounts to more than 7 trillion USD. (Accenture, 2008) Due to consumer demand, the travel companies have to be very flexible and dynamic. The travel industry is extremely competitive and it is connecting businesses from various industries. (Papakonstantinou, 2016)

In the 2018 Tourism Survey of Trekk Soft, out of all the respondents asked, 39% said that for their company last minute bookings were frequent. This shows that in general, last minute bookings are a growing trend in the industry. Typically people book thirteen days in advance, however, when they use mobile devices for their bookings this usually changes to five days only. (Kutschera, 2018)

There is a critical necessity for industry actors to join forces in order to satisfy increasing demand of consumers by designing new services and travel experiences around their needs. (Papakonstantinou, 2016) There is for example a growing need for ecological tours, or tours that give part of their profits to support ecological projects. Tours that have a cause are often chosen over the ones who do not have a similar objective. Some other customers really want to be engaged with the local culture when they visit a certain destination, therefore walking tours are an increasingly popular choice for travelers when visiting an unfamiliar place. (Kutschera, 2018)

In the face of all the security issues and geopolitical situation, the aggregate number of travel purchases are strong and constantly increasing. However, there are some risk
factors to these trends, since the growing number of security measures are a serious strain on travelers, and puts a heavy demand on infrastructure. (Amadeus, 2016)

Due to the newest trends, players from the technological industry entered into the travel industry and provided important travel tools that we can use for planning the best holiday for us. Because nearly all people use these tools now, all the data gathered provides an unbelievable insight into the consumer behavior and preferences. (Deloitte, 2019) Due to the digital technology, the importance of local travel agents is fading. Now 83% of people prefer to book online. (Rodgers, 2018)

This phase can be called the “partnership era” of the travel industry. This means that the majority of companies chose out of two different strategies: either to become “the giant” where you form alliances and acquisitions, or you can become a “satellite company” who cooperates with “the giant” by providing them with a special service. The demand for constant technological innovation is certainly going to stimulate the creation of new jobs in the coming years. (Accenture, 2008)

4.2. Consumer behavior in travel planning

In order to get inspired for their travels, plan details and do the final bookings, travelers have a high dependency on the internet. (Amaro and Duarte, 2013) According to Amadeus surveys, the percentage of travelers who use different digital devices whilst arranging everything for a trip is 95%. As online presence is expanding, it is increasingly important that travel products are accessible in the right format on all devices. This phenomenon of heightened interconnectivity allows people to book in the last minute, even if they are on the go. (Amadeus, 2016)

Due to the digital technology, the importance of local travel agents is fading. Now 83% of people prefer to book online. Since a vast amount of information is easily accessible through the internet, it is very easy to do research before making a decision. Confused by too many possible choices, people are ready to dedicate extensive amount of time to explore and eliminate alternatives and make a final decision. (Rodgers, 2018) According to Deloitte’s survey, the devices most used for the purposes of research were the tablets
and smartphones. However, when it came to the actual booking process, the most used device became the PC. (Papakonstantinou, 2016)

Table 4: Consumer behavior data based on Deloitte report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence of reading reviews</th>
<th>Participation in sharing experiences</th>
<th>Usage of mobile devices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42% use review websites</td>
<td>31% said they have posted travel related reviews</td>
<td>33% have used two or more devices while searching for a holiday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59% said these sites have the most influence on their decision</td>
<td>16% have posted about travel experience on social media</td>
<td>20% said they researched and also booked on their smartphone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46% search for feedback and comments by other people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Papakonstantinou, 2016)

Since consumers became so empowered online, there is a perceived sense of control in people when they are shopping online. This perceived control is good for increasing someone’s purchase intentions. (Amaro and Duarte, 2013) Travel organizers have seen a rise in the demand for experiences that are unique, especially among Generation Y who are also known as Millennials. They are constantly seeking new experiences and want to share it with the world. (Kutschera, 2018) In general, people go on vacation 3.5 times in one year. Within the Millennial generation, this number grows to 4.2. (Rodgers, 2018)

According to the survey of Deloitte, 59% of respondents said that the number one decision criteria they consider about their choice is the price. The final decision can be influenced by multiple factors, and very big parts of them are the ratings and reviews made by peers. (Papakonstantinou, 2016)

UGC and eWOM was not always considered trustworthy, however these information sources are thought to be more credible now than information coming from a marketing department. This phenomenon can be observed more acutely in the case of frequent travelers. Information coming from a marketing department is called Marketer Generated Content (MGC). Therefore, we can say that UGC is more trusted than MGC. (Kennel and Rushton, 2015)
Numerous issues could deter people from traveling. These include wanting to escape overly crowded destinations and avoiding seasonality, or the upswing of terrorist activity. Companies have to be able to identify and manage these circumstances by creating new solutions catering to customer needs. (Accenture, 2008)

4.3. TripAdvisor and tourism marketing

TripAdvisor is a website that relies on the exact concepts that I introduced in the previous sections of my thesis work. As I have mentioned before, the role of customers is changing from a passive stance into an active one. The case of this this company is a great example to demonstrate this change.

TripAdvisor is the biggest website when travel is concerned. (TripAdvisor, 2018.b) The company has 11% market share globally. In some more developed markets this number can be higher, for example in Europe it is 15%. (Oxford Economics, 2016) According to their website there are more than 700 million opinions posted about the greatest collection of holiday listings. (TripAdvisor, 2018.b)

Consumers independently created most of the information such as ratings, photos, videos, reviews or comments. These contributors have to have a profile and have to be logged in in order to post on the website. (Miguens, Baggio, and Costa, 2008) TripAdvisor is the biggest network for sharing and researching travel experiences. The company presents travelers with “the wisdom of the crowds”. (TripAdvisor, 2018.a) It is performing both as a hive for travelers, but also as an online travel agency (OTA). (Merzlyakova, 2017)

As discussed before, classical marketing approaches are not powerful enough, especially in the sector of tourism. The potential of electronic word-of-mouth marketing is more and more apparent, and a website like TripAdvisor is a great platform to exploit this potential. (Rustico, 2015) This platform supports users in connecting with each other, and communicating more easily. It was founded on the concept that consumers trust other consumers’ opinions to help them in their travel planning. (Miguens, Baggio and Costa, 2008) These sites give us a place where eWOM can be stored for later analysis. (Litvin, 2016) Unlike social media sites such as Facebook, on websites like TripAdvisor shoppers do not have previous affiliation with each other. (Miguens, Baggio and Costa, 2008)
5. UGC presence in consumer decision-making for travel purchase

Marketing communication can have various impacts on consumers. It can attract their attention, make them interested in a certain product or service, create or increase desire to buy, and ultimately push them to take action and complete the purchase. (Cox, et al., 2009) I would like to look at this process through two types of consumer decision-making models in the following phase of my research. These two types are the traditional five step decision-making model by Kotler and Keller, and the other one is the consumer decision journey developed by McKinsey.

5.1. Traditional five step decision-making model:

If we look at any of the decision-making process stages, UGC is able to have an influence at any stage. Travelers are searching for and reviewing different forms of content from various sources. It all depends on which stage of the decision-making and planning process they are on at that moment. (Cox, et al., 2009) We have to note that there is an insufficient amount of research about the method ho UGC influences travel purchase decisions on the different stages of the process. (Kennel and Rushton, 2015)

Figure 4: The five stages of the consumer decision-making process

The first step is the **problem recognition**. This stimulation can come to a person from the inside or from an outside source. This is where they realize their desire for something and this desire becomes an action. (Kotler and Keller, 2014)

In the context of travel, the problem-recognition stage is when the individual recognizes their need for travel. This step is important to motivate them to move on to the next step, the information search. (Ipsos MediaCT, 2014) This influence usually comes primarily
from friends and savvy travelers by means of WOM or online sources and eWOM. They also oftentimes use UGC and MGC alternately. First, they check MGC and then they tend to research UGC info to see if MGC was accurate. (Kennel and Rushton, 2015)

In the **information search** stage data can come from various sources, namely: commercial, public, personal or experiential. (Kotler and Keller, 2014) There are two ways an individual can search for information. One is the internal search when they use their own memory and experience, and the other one is more proactive, when a person is getting information from an outside source. (Chand, n.d.)

In terms of travel purchase decisions, in the information search phase user-generated content has the biggest influence. (Mitev and Markos-Kujbus, 2013) Because travel products are so intangible, consumers very much rely on UGC, mainly because the posted information is regarded as an independent source. A research attempted with users of TripAdvisor established that the most favored action online was travelers checking discussion of other travelers. (Alcazar, Pinero and Maya, 2014)

When it comes to the **evaluating alternatives** stage, according to Park (2008) and Lee (2008), if there is a bigger reference group recommending a product or service, the perceived popularity of the brand will be increasing, causing an increase in brand preference. Online opinions have two types: attribute-value (factual) reviews, and simple-recommendation reviews that are based more on subjectivity. Factual reviews have higher significance when it comes to decision-making. (Park and Lee, 2008) There are many different ways a consumer can evaluate the given alternatives. Buyers are usually seeking to satisfy a necessity, hoping for special benefits and numerous characteristics that would bring those benefits. (Kotler and Keller, 2014)

The stage of evaluating alternatives is also important in terms of user-generated content. According to Kennel (2015) and Rushton (2015) there are many way travelers utilize UGC. They can see all the possibilities to choose from in certain destinations, and they can gather additional knowledge about all options. UGC can also cause travelers to spark the need for searching additional travel products or experiences related to the given destination. This phenomenon is increasingly present in various TripAdvisor studies. Furthermore, UGC makes it easier for consumers to make a decision by helping them to assess a shortlist of chosen options. This can also be connected to third-party review sites such as TripAdvisor. (Kennel and Rushton, 2015)
Purchase intention determines the **purchase decision** phase. There are two possible factors that can influence purchase intention: attitude of others and unforeseen situations. How much we consider he attitude of others can be influenced by how negative is this individual’s attitude, and how inclined we are to adhere to this individual’s preferences. If the negativity is intensified or the individual is more familiar to us, the more inclined we will be to adhere to their preferences. (Kotler and Keller, 2014)

If we think about utilizing UGC in travel decisions, we can say that the bigger influence is bestowed upon a review, in case the user seems to have more experience in travel or they are closer to the social identity of the reader. We have mentioned that consumers oftentimes use UGC and MGC alternately. However, when they come to making the ultimate choice, they rather concentrate on UGC. (Kennel and Rushton, 2015) According to an Olapic Global Study, out of all respondents 70% replied that they would be more willing to go through with a purchase if before they saw some trustworthy reviews by other consumers. (Skift, n.d.)

In the stage of **post-purchase behavior**, consumers will be more content in case their expectations were met in connection with the purchased product or service. If they did not expect exactly what they got, they will be disappointed. However, if they are not disappointed, they are much more likely to repurchase or express positive things about the service toward other people. (Kotler and Keller, 2014)

When it comes to UGC in tourism, consumers can post online content that can influence their peers through the other stages of decision-making process. (Markos-Kujbus, 2016) To convince a consumer to be an advocate about a destination or various travel products is essential. (Alcazar, Pinero and Maya, 2014) An Ipsos study revealed that out of those buyers who had a negative incident happening to them, 52% talked about it with their acquaintances, whereas out of those who had a positive incident happening to them, 56% shared it. (Skift, n.d.) This kind of assessment of a travel experience requires reliving and posting it. Consumers usually read some reviews even after the end of their travels, because they like to contrast their experience with other people. (Kennel and Rushton, 2015)
5.2. Consumer decision journey

It is important to talk about “marketing touchpoints”, where companies are trying to reach consumers and grab their attention to deliver a message. For a long time this process was well known in the form of a funnel. In this technique, customers were initially considering a certain number of brands, and further down the line they gradually reduced this number until they were able to decide on one. (Medium, 2017) The technological revolution interfered in the traditional consumer journey to purchase, and transformed the way people are shopping for travel products. (Papakonstantinou, 2016) This funnel approach to understand touchpoints became outdated with advanced digital technology, and the growth of product alternatives. With consumers having access to huge amount of information, it became necessary to have a new approach to analyze their journey, which is not as linear as the funnel idea. For this reason, McKinsey came up with the circular model of the journey. (Court, et al., 2009)

Figure 5: Steps of consumer decision-making journey as introduced by McKinsey
The four most important stages of the journey are the following:

1. The consumer, based on previous information and perceptions have an initial set of brands that they consider right from the start. (McKinsey, 2017) If a brand is included in this initial set, the possibility of a customer purchasing it at the end is three times more likely. (Court, et al., 2009)

2. This stage is called the active evaluation. This is the stage of further research, including further brands into the consideration set, or eliminating them based on the research. (Satell, 2015) Approximately 66.6% of the touchpoints here contain “consumer driven touchpoints” for example WOM (both electronic and in person) or online information published by peers. (Court, et al., 2009) When it comes to peer recommendations, the perception about their trustworthiness is most important factor to consider when thinking about how consumers adopt them through the decision journey. (Kennel and Rushton, 2015)

3. The third step is the actual purchase, the moment when the product or service is purchased. (Court, et al., 2009)

4. The name of this step is “post purchase experience”. This is the part where they form their judgement and opinion. This opinion they are going to use for their following decision, and this is what causes this model to be a cycle. (Medium, 2017)

In this model, there is a loyalty or feedback loop included. (Edelman and Singer, 2015) There are two types of people: active loyalists (who take time to recommend) and passive loyalists (who repurchase the brand but they are not committed and they remain susceptible to messages from competing products or services. (Court, et al., 2009) It is more difficult than ever to create loyal consumers.
Table 5: UGC presence in decision-making for travel summary table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presence of UGC in each decision making stage</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Referencing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem recognition:</strong></td>
<td>Individuals influenced by UGC realized their need for travel</td>
<td>Ipsos MediaCT, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Influence can come from friends or savvy travelers</td>
<td>Kennel and Rushton, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People flick between UGC and MGC for inspiration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information search/ Initial consideration set:</strong></td>
<td>UGC has the biggest influence here…</td>
<td>Mitev and Markos-Kujbus, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>due to intangible nature of travel</td>
<td>Alcazar, Pinero and Maya, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research attempted with TripAdvisor users has shown that checking discussion of other travelers was most favored action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluating alternatives/Active evaluation phase:</strong></td>
<td>Travelers use UGC to gather additional knowledge about all their options</td>
<td>Kennel and Rushton, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UGC can spark the need for searching additional travel products (increasingly present in various TripAdvisor research)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UGC helps to assess a shortlist of options (also connected to third-party review sites like TripAdvisor)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purchase decision/Moment of purchase:</strong></td>
<td>People are more willing to go through with a purchase after seeing trustworthy reviews</td>
<td>Skift, n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The more experience a reviewer has in travel or the closer they are to social identity of the reader, the bigger influence they have</td>
<td>Kennel and Rushton, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post-purchase behavior/Loyalty loop:</strong></td>
<td>Consumers need to be convinced to be an advocate of the service</td>
<td>Alcazar, Pinero and Maya, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People were almost equally motivated to be advocates in case of positive or negative experience</td>
<td>Skift, n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being an advocate influences other peers in travel purchase decisions.</td>
<td>Markos-Kujbus, 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Own elaboration – summary table of chapter)
6. Methodology

In this thesis work my research question is:

How user-generated content (UGC) on TripAdvisor is affecting the decision-making process of the leisure traveler?

For conducting this research, I have looked at the appropriate literature in the following topics:

- UGC and related concepts (prosumption, co-creation, electronic word-of-mouth)
- Effects of UGC on companies and consumers
- Consumer behavior in the industry of tourism
- TripAdvisor in tourism marketing
- Consumer decision making process (traditional and McKinsey model)

To further analyze this question and have a deeper understanding of the topic, a qualitative research method was chosen for primary research.

Qualitative research method is usually conducted to attempt to have an insight into the subconscious mind of participants. This kind of research is very effective when detecting which emotions are the most influential for customers. (Malhotra, 2010) I have decided to use a direct approach of qualitative research: focus group interview. The focus group interview gives us knowledge about how people view a certain topic. An important question of this method is “How people consider an experience, idea or event?” (Freitas, et al., 1998)

I also found it useful to complement my research with the help of an online social listening tool called Sentione.

I have identified seven sub-questions to my research question. All these sub-questions will result in answering the main research question of the thesis. Sub questions include:
Do consumers consider UGC in their decision-making?

- **Sub-question 1**: How important is UGC when making a decision?
- **Sub-question 2**: In which stages of decision-making process does UGC affect consumers more?

In what specific ways UGC on TripAdvisor is influencing travel purchase decisions?

- **Sub-question 3**: Do they prefer UGC to marketer generated content (MGC)?
- **Sub-question 4**: Do they prefer written reviews to visual content?
- **Sub-question 5**: Do they consider positive or negative reviews more?
- **Sub-question 6**: How do consumers participate in UGC creation? What are the possible motivations behind participation?
- **Sub-question 7**: Do they consider the person behind the created content? Does it affect credibility of the post/review?

### 6.1. Focus group interview:

According to Gibbs (1997), this research method has advantages but limitations as well. One of the limitations for example is that the mediator has less control over the discussion between participants. Another important detail is that since participants have a group interaction, answers are not anonymous. Therefore, respondents could be discouraged from participation, or can be deterred by expressing true feelings due to fear of being judged about the answer.

The advantage of the focus group interview is that it helps the researcher go into a deeper conversation about different and much diverse topics and examine people’s attitudes toward them. This interactive atmosphere enables to discuss more questions and give different explanations on human behavior, as well as the changing attitudes during the conversation. (Gibbs, 1997) Since I am writing about how different peer-generated content influences other peer groups, it is very useful to choose this research method, because it shows us in live action how we can change our attitudes due to differing opinions of our peers. We can see their true reaction through body language and group interaction.
The interview was conducted, with me as a moderator. The method of sample selection was convenience sampling. Some characteristics of my focus group sample were the following:

- The group had 12 participants (I wanted to select the maximum amount of people recommended for a focus group interview, so that I can gain more diverse insights with a bigger sample. I found it more helpful for my research to have as many opposing views as possible, in order to get a more holistic picture in the end.)
- The participants are ranging from 20 to 35 (This is roughly the age of Generation Y, which is the most important and relevant group in this topic of research, as they are the ones spending the most on travel and travel related products and services.)
- The participants are very diverse in nationality. The list of nationalities: Hungarian, Georgian, Vietnamese, Jordanian, Tunisian, Belgian, Austrian, French and German. (I thought this would give the research a much broader perspective and possibly more diverse ideas. I purposefully selected EU and non-EU citizens for the sample, as they have other factors to consider in connection with travel planning, like applying for a visa.)
- Occupation of participants: university student, creative copywriter, salesforce specialist, department manager, marketing assistant, software engineer, university professor, sourcing analyst, feature group leader, service desk agent (I thought to include participants from diverse professional background, as we can have a more wholesome picture of the “average leisure traveler”. This way the sample gives us people from diverse professional backgrounds, and different budgets for travel.)
- In the groups, frequent and non-frequent travelers were included

The interview had a semi-structured format, where I am the moderator and I follow a guide of questions. There were three parts of the interview. General questions about travel planning, TripAdvisor related questions, and finally some pictures and real-life examples were included to show respondents, and ask their opinion, feelings and attitudes about it.
Introduction:

Before I went into the questions, I informed the participants about what the discussion will be about, and what the aim of it is. I made sure they know their personal data is confidential and only their ideas will be recorded for the sake of my analysis.

After this, everyone introduced themselves to the group. Part of the introduction were the following questions:

- Please state your age
- Please state your gender
- What is your professional background?
- How many times have you traveled in the last year?

In the following section, I included a summary table of the answers of all 12 participants.

Table 6: List of focus group respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONDENT</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>NATIONALITY</th>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>TRAVELED LAST YEAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ukrainian</td>
<td>university student</td>
<td>5 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>university student</td>
<td>2 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Georgian</td>
<td>university student</td>
<td>1 time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>creative copywriter</td>
<td>9 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Austrian</td>
<td>salesforce specialist</td>
<td>8 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>department manager</td>
<td>0 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>marketing assistant</td>
<td>3 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Tunisian</td>
<td>software engineer</td>
<td>11 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>university professor</td>
<td>3 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>sourcing analyst</td>
<td>17 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>feature group leader</td>
<td>5 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>service desk agent</td>
<td>4 times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the introduction, I wanted to include a warm up question, that puts everyone in the right mindset and they start to think about their travel experiences. The introductory question was the following: Do you like traveling? / Do you travel often?

**Questions that are more general included:**

- When you travel, what is the first step of your travel planning? What are the most important things you consider while planning your travels?
- When you are trying to decide about accommodations or things to do in a destination, how do you reach your final conclusion?
- Do you post/share your experiences online about your travels? Why or why not?
- When you see a friend or acquaintance posting about their travels what do you think or how do you feel about it?
- When you see companies or travel agents post about travel products and services what do you think or how do you feel about it?
- Which post would convince you more to start a travel plan (from a company or from an ordinary person posting about previous experience)?

These questions were asked to find out general feelings and attitudes of participants. I wanted to see how they start planning their travels, and whether in this planning process UGC played a role or not. I wanted to find out if they are participating in the creation of UGC and if yes how they are doing that. I thought it necessary to look at how they differentiate UGC from MGC, and how they use this content in their decision-making process.

**TripAdvisor related question:**

- Do you know TripAdvisor? Do you use it while planning your travels?
- How much would TripAdvisor influence you in your travel purchase decision? Why?
- Would you be more influenced by a positive or negative review? Why?
- Do you look at the visual content on TripAdvisor? (For example the pictures that previous customers posted after their stay in a hotel). Why or why not?
Which would influence you more, a written comment or an image? Why?
Do you ever think about looking at who made the review? Does it matter for you?
Have you ever shared anything on TripAdvisor? If yes what, and if not, what would motivate you to do it?

In this part of the interview, I asked participants more questions that are specifically about TripAdvisor. I aimed to find out their opinions about the site and the way they used it during planning their vacation. After that, I included more specific questions about the content itself. I aspired to observe how they are influenced by a positive and negative review, whether they look at the visual content on the website, and which type of content they feel more influenced by: written or visual. After this, I tried to reveal their thoughts about possible fake reviews, or whether they took into consideration the persona behind a review at all.

Questions about examples shown in the discussion:

This question was asked with the intent to find out, what participants look at first, when they see a TripAdvisor profile of an accommodation. (Pictures, rating, number of reviews, etc…)

**Question:** Which of these two items would you choose based on the next two pictures and why? (Screenshots of listings with different prices, ratings and number of reviews are shown)

**Figure 6:** Low number of reviews, lower price
The following section was created with the intent to find out the following information:

- Do consumers consider negative or positive reviews more?
- Do the make a difference between attribute-value and simple recommendation reviews?

**Question:** What do you think about when you are considering booking a hotel, but you see this review (a subjective negative review is shown, with no real factual information)

**Figure 8: Subjective negative review**

**Question:** You see another review of the same hotel. Which influences you more? (An objective positive review with a lot of factual information is shown)
Figure 9: Objective positive review

```
Great Value for Money!!!

“This hotel offers a great location from which you can explore Athens. It is about a 12 minute walk to METAXOURGIO METRO STATION which is extremely safe and allows you to get to all of the ancient sites. The staff are very nice and friendly. The breakfast is basic but fine. The rooms are small but comfortable and there is even an in room safe. The area surrounding it can be a little intimidating as it is filled with mostly refugees but if you don't go out out late at night then it is fine. I've saved the best until last; the roof has tables and chairs that allow you to have a drink or food while getting an amazing view of the Acropolis. My wife and I were there for 10 nights and found that the hotel exceeded our expectations.”
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Date of stay: April 2019

Figure 10: Objective negative review

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Worse than a youth hostel

“I don’t recommend booking this hotel. We have traveled a lot and we usually need minimal of decent conditions. This can not be called a hotel, should be actually closed down considering how it looks like on the inside. the bathroom was ridiculously small, the tile floor in it was broken and the toilet was smelting. It looked like one of those filthy hotels you can find in Asia. But even there we didn't have such bad quality of accommodation. 10 Eur for a night is well pays here but unfortunately we paid more than that, not to mention the street night life and the whole area behind the Omonia Square. It is a very bad neighborhood, lots of people sleeping on the streets and police in action all the time. I didn't enjoy my stay in this hotel or in this area of Athens. The only advantage was that it was close to Omonia metro station.”
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Date of stay: July 2018

Trip type: Traveled as a couple
Room Tip: chose other hotel

The following question was put in the focus group with the intent to find out if respondents care about who posted the review. Does it affect credibility of the post?
Question: Let us check who made the review. What do you think of the reviews now that you see the profiles behind? (TripAdvisor profiles of all commenters shown with the appropriate comment)

Figure 11: Subjective negative review persona

Figure 12: Objective positive review persona

Figure 13: Objective negative review persona
The following section was included with the intent to find out, how respondents feel about content posted by the management versus content posted by a fellow traveler. I wanted to look at their attitudes in general about UGC versus MGC.

*Question:* What do you think about this hotel room based on the picture? Would you consider booking? (On screenshot, it is clearly shown hotel management posted that picture)

*Figure 14: Room photo posted by hotel management*

*Question:* The photo was taken in the same hotel. What do you think now? (On the screenshot, it is clearly shown a hotel guest posted that picture)

*Figure 15: Room photo posted by customer*
The next part of the interview was constructed to observe how participants compare a written comment and a picture about the same room. Which influences them more, or in what ways it influences them to compare the two?

**Question:** You are considering booking a room and you see this review about the state of cleanliness of the rooms. (Review says room was extremely smelly and dirty, with dirty blankets)

**Figure 16:** Review stating room is dirty

![Review stating room is dirty](image)

**Question:** After the review, you find a picture someone took who stayed at the hotel. (Screenshot of a picture where we can clearly see the room is not dirty)

**Figure 17:** Picture showing room is clean

![Picture showing room is clean](image)

**Question:** What do you think now? Which would influence you more in your decision?

At the end of the interview, I wanted to ask participants what they think is the most important topic we discussed, or whether they would like to add anything else to the discussion.
6.2. Online social listening

When it comes to the effects of user-generated content and electronic word-of-mouth, it is important to see how and what people are sharing/talking online. I chose to use Sentione, because it can provide extra information about online content related to TripAdvisor. These findings will complement the results I will have from the focus group interview and give us extra insight about the online conversation surrounding the brand.

For this reason, I thought it appropriate to use Sentione, which is an online social listening tool. This tool pulls data from various sources, and analyzes all mentions of a particular brand, making conclusions on brand health, consumer sentiment, most influential platforms, etc. With Sentione we get access to over “27 944 312 971 mentions in real time”. It is possible to gather mentions of a particular brand or topic from various different sources on the web. By having an insight into what people post or comment, we can analyze the attitudes and opinions of consumers. This will provide us with a more in-depth understanding of the topic of research. (Sentione, 2019.b)

I have decided to create two projects to have an overall picture of the TripAdvisor brand and related consumer attitudes online. The first project includes all mentions where the word “TripAdvisor” is present. I created that for the reason of examining in general what kind of content is there that is related to the brand in any form. However, this project includes all content on the TripAdvisor websites and social media pages.

Therefore, to have a clearer picture of actual consumer sentiment toward the company, I have created another project where I excluded all content from TripAdvisor websites and their social media. With the help of this project, we can see what is the general consumer sentiment toward the brand and where they are mentioned the most online. We can also see the most important keywords associated with the service. From these reports, we can draw a conclusion how much consumers associate the brand name with their travel experiences.
7. Elaboration

Before the analysis, the Elaboration part is included in the thesis. The elaboration is only an overview of the responses, structured along the framework of the focus group interview. A more in-depth analysis focused on identifying underlying motives, patterns and conclusive remarks will follow the elaboration part.

7.1. Discussion of focus group interview answers

The interview was conducted, with me as a moderator. Some characteristics of my focus group sample were the following:

- The group included 12 participants
- The participants are ranging from 20 to 35
- The participants are very diverse in nationality.
- They had a diverse list of occupation
- In the groups, frequent and non-frequent travelers were included

As I have mentioned in the methodology part of the thesis, firstly I informed the participants about what the discussion will be about, and what the aim of it is. I made sure they know their personal data is confidential and only their ideas will be recorded for the sake of my analysis.

After this, everyone introduced themselves to the group. Part of the introduction were the following questions:

- Please state your age
- Please state your gender
- What is your professional background?
- How many times have you traveled in the last year (not including business trips)?

After the introduction, I wanted to include a warm up question, that puts everyone in the right mindset and start to think about his or her travel experiences. The introductory
question was the following: Do you like traveling? / Do you travel often? In the next section, I will present the most valuable quotes on this topic. I believe these quotes have valuable information about travel motivations and limitations. Moreover, they already contain information on some of the factors people consider in their decision-making process when purchasing travel products.

- “Trying different adventures and going around meeting people, it is all a fun experience.” (Respondent E)
- “The traveling itself is not that pleasant, but being there at the destination is always fun and a good experience. With my family we almost every year go to a destination that is far away from us. Therefore, I have been to many places because of that.” (Respondent I)

Answers of Respondent E and Respondent I indicate that the main motivation behind their travels is having fun, and gaining new experiences.

- “I like traveling but it depends a lot on your money how often you travel. It depends on your time too.” (Respondent I)
- “At the end of April, I am planning a trip, but the country is not chosen yet.” (Respondent F)
- “I like traveling a lot. These days I do not have much time so I try to go see some cities over the weekend that are close. I also travel abroad like three times a year.” (Respondent A)
- “I love traveling but I do not have the opportunity too often.” (Respondent B)

Respondent L, F and B mention that the first two constraints they need to consider before traveling is time and money. Everyone had different level of limitations in these two variables, but the point that comes across is the same. It can be for reasons of limited day offs or student holidays, very limited budgets or wanting to fit as many holidays into the budget as possible.

- “Yes, traveling is one of my hobbies. I travel occasionally.” (Respondent J)
- “I try to make sure I travel at least every two months.” (Respondent H)
Respondents J and H consider traveling a hobby. Almost as a sport, they try to travel as much as possible. Relating to previous responses they also have certain time and budget limitations they are trying to maximize the best way possible.

We can already draw conclusions from the introductory part of the interview. We can say that some people travel to have fun and gain new experiences and some people treat it almost as a sport for hobby purposes. An overarching conclusion we can say for all respondents is that they consider budget and free time as first determining factors of their travels.

7.1.1. General questions

For each question, I will include the most important quotes, indicating from which respondent the quote originally came from. Most of the time I will have only one sentence highlighted from their remarks that was meaningful. However, if I feel it is relevant, I will include several sentences or even small dialogues from my interview.

For general questions as I already mentioned in my methodology part, I aimed to find out general feelings and attitudes of participants. I wanted to see how they start planning their travels, and whether in this planning process UGC played a role or not. I wanted to find out if they are participating in the creation of UGC and if yes how they are doing that. I thought it necessary to look at how they differentiate UGC from MGC, and how they use this content in their decision-making process.

What is the first step of your travel planning? What are the most important things you consider while planning your travels?

For this question at first similar answers were repeated as for the introductory question. Constraints of time and money were brought up in the initial responses.

- “Checking my bank account. Travelling is expensive and I need to know how much money I can spend.” (Respondent C)
- “Maybe the first step: what I would like to do and am I going to have enough day off?” (Respondent D)
“It depends on the destination but I usually start with comparing the prices of flight / train / bus tickets to find the best one... which for me means the cheapest” (Respondent H)

In relevance to this discussion, I would like to include a dialogue the exact same way it happened during the focus group interview. I believe it will be a valuable piece to use for my analysis, since it very clearly shows opposing views and circumstances on how people start planning for their travels.

- “The destination for sure is the first... when you start planning you plan for the destination and look for the tickets. (Respondent B)
- No, but it depends... sometimes for example I just go to the website and just look for the cheapest tickets. (Respondent L)
- It is also an option on Skyscanner that you can put to “Anywhere”. I put the month that you want to go and then it will show you the prices. (Respondent D)
- Yes, for me it does not start like “okay let’s go to Italy” but for example, “okay I feel like traveling; let’s see where the cheapest is”. (Respondent I)
- Okay, but it differs for us, because for example if I do not have the visa, I would not be able to just check for cheap tickets anywhere. I would have to have a destination that I need to apply for and then go through the process from there.” (Respondent B)

The next quote is very interesting in terms of UGC usage of a consumer. He mentions that he specifically uses a specific user community on Facebook, called “Utazómajom”. This is a Hungarian group where members can share their travel experience with the others. They usually post tips and tricks about how to get by at the given destination. They also have a page, where they track and post the most favorable offers of different travel companies. They are not trying to advertise any specific companies, but rather help travelers find the best offers and cheapest options they can find on any site.

- “I guess I have two types of travels because as you are working you are limited to the weekends and the vacation days that you have. So the first one is if I want to visit a friend. The second one is just to go on Facebook, look up “Utazómajom”, and check some destinations. Usually these dates they offer are not good for me
but it just gives you an idea about where to go and just go with that and research a little bit.” (Respondent J)

The next quote I have found it relevant because it mentions word-of-mouth as primary source of information, and user-generated content (especially content from TripAdvisor) as the secondary source of gathering information for decision-making.

- “For me I have a group of friends, who are frequent travelers, and I always ask them because they have visited a lot of places and I trust them because I know they know everything where I can go and what should I see or where should I eat... everything. Because this is the easiest way for me. And after I decide the place, I use TripAdvisor to find top places. Or do a Google search to know what should I see. But the first thing is to ask my friends for recommendation based on their experience.” (Respondent G)

Do you post/share your experiences online about your travels? Why or why not?

The first three quotes show the motivation behind sharing content with others. Some want to share places that are special for them or “touched them” in a certain way, and some want to let people know about their good fortune “to make everybody jealous”. Few respondents also mentioned that they like to post for their own pleasure, so that later they will have a gallery of their most treasured memories.

- “I never post anything. I’ve never done it. I want to do it one time in my life, when I go to New York. That will be my first check-in on Facebook. Because this is my big dream to go there.” (Respondent A)
- “It depends on where we were and what we did. About a family trip or a biking tour I usually post a few pictures - just to make everybody jealous about it” (Respondent K)
- “Not really, only places that touched me. I do not really like to share my travels” (Respondent I)
- “I post photos sometimes because later I like to look back on it as a good memory.” (Respondent J)
- “During a trip, I don’t like spending much time on social media but after the trip I usually post 1-2 pictures to keep them as memories.” (Respondent L)
The following comments from respondents made it obvious that Instagram is clearly the most preferred site for them when it comes to sharing travel experiences.

- Yes, on Instagram story, or maybe posting one or two pictures to Instagram but that’s it. I am not posting like 24/7 (Respondent E)
- I also never posted anything about travels to Facebook, it is mostly Instagram. (Respondent C)
- I like beautiful artistic pictures that is better in Instagram content. Facebook for me it is more official. Instagram is mostly for pictures. (Respondent G)
- For me Facebook is for other things and Instagram is for traveling. (Respondent A)

When you see a friend or acquaintance posting about their travels what do you think or how do you feel about it?

In this next section, again I wanted to include a full dialogue as it happened during the interview. It shows us the different attitudes toward UGC shared online. Some people like to see it because they like to imagine being on vacation, some people like it only in limited amounts, and others are rather annoyed and jealous when seeing these posts. The last comment of Respondent D was quite negative and contained inappropriate language even.

This shows a strong emotional reaction to encountering UGC when browsing online.

- “I want to be with them (Respondent L)
- I am jealous (Respondent C)
- Sometimes it is nice to see beautiful pictures about the beach like aww... I wish I was there... But if it keeps going into my face then no thanks, it’s annoying. (Respondent I)
- Yes, me too, I rather feel annoyed by the people who are like check in the airport and check in the hotel and you see every day, and you are like okay we get it, you are there, we do not need to know every movement you are doing. (Respondent B)
- Yes for example my boss is in Hawaii right now and she is posting all the time and I am like *** (Respondent D)“

This next quote was about the topic of Facebook group for travelers. This similar topic (to “Utazómajom”) came up again as something respondents enjoy checking out. From what I could tell, Respondent C was speaking about the same concept as Respondent J
previously: a Facebook group where fellow travelers share their experience and help each other with tips and tricks.

- “In Georgia we have Facebook group of travelers and it is really helpful for potential travelers to follow those active people posting their travel experiences. I like when they are sharing pictures with description that says something about their experiences.” (Respondent C)

Even though the topic of MGC was not yet brought up by the moderator, one respondent already brought it up in their response the following way:

- “But I don’t like when they post to encourage you to join their community. Because I feel, they are trying to sell me something. Of course, I check because picture is attractive but I do not like it. I prefer when ordinary people post.” (Respondent G)

**When you see companies or travel agents post about travel products and services what do you think or how do you feel about it? Which post would convince you more to start a travel plan (from a company or from an ordinary person posting about previous experience)?**

The first thing that stood out when overviewing the answers is that frequent travelers who also consider traveling a hobby, enjoy planning their travels individually and they do not like to rely on MGC when deciding about travel purchases.

- “Personally, I do not care much because everywhere I go I usually know what I want to do and it is not really changing my plans. I know what I need and I am checking everything out on my own. I do not need extra help from companies in finding accommodation or restaurants.” (Respondent J)
- “Part of the joy of traveling is to plan it. I enjoy that” (Respondent H)
- “Yeah me too definitely, it is part of the fun.” (Respondent D)

Some people did express motivation to consider MGC due to lack of time or out of laziness to do individual research:
There are some cases when for example, you travel with family and you do not want to spend that much time to research every single detail. In this case, it is more comfortable to consider the offers of travel agents.” (Respondent E)

“I think travel agent offers are more for the people who do not spend that much time on looking up restaurants or accommodation online. Because some are more experienced in this and we are very good at multitasking. Those who do not have that much time to plan the holiday could find it helpful to see offers from travel companies.” (Respondent K)

Company posts would influence some people, because they perceive travel agents and companies to be cheaper. Other people however believe they can organize a more cost efficient trip if they plan for themselves.

“I have never traveled with a travel agency. Because if I plan it, I can do it cheaper.” (Respondent H)

“Yes, first you can plan cheaper, and second if you go to a place where you can see many things, then I want to decide what I will see and when. I want to choose when and how and what and everything. Do not tell me how to live my life.” (Respondent L)

“Yeah but there are times when it is cheaper with the travel agency. Because for us like going from Jordan to Egypt let’s say... if you take one offer that you can actually include your flight, your hotel, 24 hours food and drinks and everything... it’s 200 Euros for example. If you want to do it by yourself, it is going to cost you more. So when it comes to certain places it’s much cheaper and more convenient to buy it through an agency.” (Respondent B)

The next quotes will show respondent’s opinions on how they consider UGC more trustworthy than MGC and why that is their opinion.

“When I see a post that was posted by the company and it says that you will have a good experience here... and the second post is my friend who says it was really cool, of course I trust my friend and not the company. Because I know that, she or he will post real experience. But in case of the company it is more general” (Respondent A)
o “I think it’s very subjective from the company side. Of course they are promoting their product and they want to show how cool they are in a particular industry.” (Respondent F)

o “I think the idea is that companies are trying to give you positive information about a destination and they never indicate negative things. In case of friends, they post everything. Positive and negative.” (Respondent E)

o “I think you trust people more than you trust companies. Because even these companies started to use influencers. But I trust more my friends than influencers.” (Respondent G)

o “For me, even of the company has good brand image, and I see some posts, it is not enough for me to go there. I know that I will check somewhere else, I will ask someone if they visited it, I will see the reviews and comments and everything. One post is not enough.” (Respondent K)

In some cases, they do consider company posts trustworthy enough, but most importantly, they believe they are “smart enough” to differentiate between reliable and non-reliable sources.

o “For example, I was working for a travel agency once, and I know for a fact that what they post about their packages is always very reliable. So I think the company also matters a lot.” (Respondent C)

o “I believe that we are competent enough to find the real professional companies and real opinion of the person. There are so many tools on the internet and you can find who is professional and whom you can trust or not.” (Respondent A)

Short summary of results in this section:

- First aspects of travel planning that people consider are free time and budget.

- During planning: some people go first for the destination; some go for the cheapest option no matter the destination. As observed, people from outside of EU are more restricted in their planning due to having to consider applying for visa as a first step. People inside of the EU can be more flexible with the choice of destination.

- Facebook groups, where there is a strong user-community of experienced travelers who share their tips and tricks are also a preferred source of UGC.

- WOM from friends and family is more influential than UGC.
• When starting to search for UGC in the planning process, multiple respondents mentioned TripAdvisor as their first choice.

• When respondents share content on their travels, the number one platform is Instagram. Motivations include visiting a special place close to their heart, making other people jealous and showing off, or creating a gallery of memories.

• When encountering UGC about travel online, people have a wide range of reactions starting from joy of imagining being there to being annoyed and jealous of other people. This topic in general created strong emotional reactions in respondents.

• Respondents do not like when they feel like they are recommended something for monetary gains — meaning if they feel like the person recommending something has an interest in the sales numbers.

• Frequent travelers have a routine of planning, for this reason; they do not really consider marketer generated content for purchase.

• When respondents do consider offers thanks to marketer-generated content is for reasons of lack of time and laziness. They consider for example pre-planned trip offers from travel agents.

• Organized trips are perceived to be cheaper by some people; however, others believe the opposite is true.

• Respondents consider UGC more trustworthy than MGC.

7.1.2. TripAdvisor questions

In the following part, I will include all relevant quotes and dialogues that were related more closely to TripAdvisor and how they utilize content on this webpage. As I have mentioned already in the methodology part of my thesis, I aimed to find out respondents’ opinions about the site and the way they used it during planning their vacation. After that, I included more specific questions about the content. I aspired to observe how they are influenced by a positive and negative review, whether they look at the visual content on the website, and which type of content they feel more influenced by: written or visual. After this, I tried to reveal their thoughts about possible fake reviews, or whether they took into consideration the persona behind a review at all.
Do you know TripAdvisor? Do you use it while planning your travels?

In the following dialogue, we can observe that the first association in connection with TripAdvisor was restaurant reviews. Some people use the website often, some do not use it at all, but the underlying meaning of this section is that they all agree that TripAdvisor is providing good service.

- “I know it but I have never used it.” (Respondent F)
- “I think it is good especially for restaurants because you can read comments about how good the dish is. But for destination I never check it.” (Respondent G)
- “When I travel, I always use TripAdvisor especially to find some places to eat.” (Respondent J)
- “For restaurants, I never use it because people have so different taste. So I don’t trust those comments.” (Respondent K)
- “But they pretty much have like every restaurant. You can search very easily on different dishes in different restaurants. So they are doing a really great job with that.” (Respondent G)
- “I am not saying they are not doing a good job; I am just not really using the site.” (Respondent F)

Another observation respondents felt important to mention, is the unavoidability of the website. They all noticed that anytime they Google some travel related things, in the search results TripAdvisor always comes out on top. Some interview participants liked this and one even mentioned subscribing to newsletter. Others were less impressed.

- “I used it but not willingly. I did a Google search and it just opened automatically. The first two things Google found were links to TripAdvisor. And the TripAdvisor app was once downloaded to my phone, I don’t know for what reason, and the phone somehow just automatically opened the app. But it wasn’t on purpose so I closed it and kept Googling.” (Respondent F)
- “The thing is, TripAdvisor ads are everywhere. So if you search best restaurant in Google, the first website is going to be TripAdvisor.” (Respondent H)
- TripAdvisor advertisements in Google are always on the first place. And when I click them they describe the places very well and they provide information about other customers’ experiences and also every product which is connected to
I have found the following quote a very valuable explanation on how some people use the service of TripAdvisor. This respondent mentions that even though the tour offered by the website was not suitable for her neither in timeframe nor in price, she found it useful to take the main attractions of the trip and organize it for herself. Even though she could not take the original trip recommended, she mentions this as a good experience with the website and useful information for her planning.

- “I had a good experience last summer with TripAdvisor search. I rarely use and I am not searching a lot. But when I was looking for ideas for one day trips or weekend offers TripAdvisor appeared on google on the first page and I saw lots of recommendations about what I should visit. I also saw organized trips, and I did not go with those because first they were very expensive and second they had fixed times and program. This was not a flexible choice for me. But I liked their offers about what to see and what to visit. So I organized a trip for myself based on their recommendations.” (Respondent I)

How much would TripAdvisor influence you in your travel purchase decision? Why?

In the following quotes, we can see that people have the perception that other people only like to comment if they have something to complain about. For this reason, they feel like TripAdvisor will not influence them so much in their decisions.

- “In my opinion, the problem with TripAdvisor and any kind of platform where you know you have the free opinion and you can post whatever you want is that you know people mostly share negative. They are so triggered by negative experience they only post that, and because of that the positive stuff is always hidden.” (Respondent D)

- “But if you are reading TripAdvisor comments and reviews, just do not take it face value all the time. Because usually those people who have a bad experience comment on it. Because if they had a good experience they do not bother commenting. Complaining is much easier.”(Respondent E)
“If someone finds a cockroach in a room, they will talk about cockroach. But for example 99% of the people who were satisfied with the service they will not say anything.” (Respondent A)

The following respondents are not that influenced in their decision by TripAdvisor according to their statements. They prefer other sources of information. However, in some statements they also mentioned they would check out TripAdvisor for extra information if needed.

“On a scale of 1 to 10 I give a 3 to TripAdvisor. Since people can experience any thought on there, it is normal that there are good thoughts and bad thoughts. So I don’t really trust it until I get through that experience on my own.” (Respondent I)

“I usually check mostly blogs and Facebook groups” (Respondent J)

Other respondents mentioned how TripAdvisor reviews would definitely be able to influence them in their decisions, and even change their plans. They found it useful for gathering additional information to make their final decisions, or check up on truthfulness of MGC they encounter. An especially valuable quote in my opinion comes from Respondent G, which shows how the size of the reference group creates trust in the user.

“For accommodation, it definitely influences me. Because for example I did not go to Paris because every single accommodation that I found it said that, there are bed bugs all over the place. So apparently, Paris is bed bug infested.” (Respondent D)

“Yeah also even when an agency recommends a hotel, I would definitely go on TripAdvisor to check to see the actual user picture that is added, and check if it really looks like the picture they posted.” (Respondent E)

“If I’m looking for a place for good food in the city that is recommended by tourists and locals alike, I’d definitely use TripAdvisor (in fact, I’ve already done so for most of my travels). The user reviews make me feel that someone has already experienced what I am just considering to try and has an opinion about it, which might be useful for me.” (Respondent H)

I trust it because it is such a widely used platform, this many people just cannot be wrong. It is generally one of my first pages to visit for recommendations and reviews of accommodation and restaurants. I don’t like to use it for looking up
“things to do” though, because I feel like I can only find the mainstream, touristy stuff as compared to the hidden gems, etc., that I could find in blog posts or friend recommendations. (Respondent G)

Would you be more influenced by a positive or negative review? Why?

During the focus group discussion, it already came up in conversation how participants have the perception that people really like to complain. For this reason, in this section many responses emphasized that they do not like to consider negative reviews and they prefer positive ones.

- “I am searching for the positive reviews every time, because I want to see the positive side if the locations. For example, information like “this hostel is near the metro station”. Like this is a positive for me. It also depends. If a negative review is just one out of ten, I would still focus on the positive side.” (Respondent B)
- “People write so many negative reviews that if there are some positive things it means that they really liked it so they took the time to write. I do not like the negative comments because when I read one I feel like they wrote not true things.” (Respondent I)
- “When something is not normal or not that good, people always write that it was bad.” (Respondent G)

On the other hand, there was mention of the number of negative reviews. Here again the size of reference group has an effect on how much an individual would consider a negative review. The bigger the reference group, the more they consider.

- “If it’s all bad reviews, it obviously counts, because there must be a reason for it. But I mean there is just a million reasons why someone would have a negative experience somewhere.” (Respondent K)

Among respondents, there were also a few people who seemed rather indifferent towards the sentiment of the review. They did not care if it was positive or negative.

- “For me it’s 50/50. It influences me equally.” (Respondent I)
“I have zero feeling toward positive or negative reviews. Because it is, like “yeah that can happen... But the other thing can also happen...” Maybe it was one bad day of the staff or something.” (Respondent A)

On one element, all participants seemed to agree equally: the sentiment of the review does not matter, rather the quality of the information included. If people were searching for a certain detail and they could find it in the reviews, they were highly satisfied. These reviews truly had a big effect on them.

“Tended not influenced at all about positive or negative. I am influenced by the information included. For example when they talk about how far the accommodation is from the city center.” (Respondent H)

“I love those kind of reviews that are honest. For example, when we had a trip to Croatia, the accommodation was on top of the hill. And someone commented even though it’s 150 meters from the beach, it’s up a hill and it’s really high. So be prepared that it is a 20-minute walk and you are going to get very tired, but it is worth it because the view is beautiful. And the way they put it was convincing, and it turned out to be very true.” (Respondent D)

Do you look at the visual content on TripAdvisor? (For example the pictures that previous customers posted after their stay in a hotel). Why or why not? Which would influence you more, a written comment or an image? Why?

For this part, I have not received so many valuable responses. Mostly people did not even check visual content posted by other users, and one respondent even asked if there is really an option for that. This would suggest that visual content of TripAdvisor has an insignificant influence on consumers.

Most people stated that a written comment would definitely have a bigger influence on them when making a decision.

“I don't really look at the visual content. A written comment would definitely influence me more.” (Respondent J)

“Written comments definitely have bigger effect on me, in my experience, TripAdvisor doesn’t have the best pictures, and I feel like those are uploaded by
people who have yet to figure out how smartphone cameras work. Normally, I would look up pictures on Instagram, Facebook or Google.” (Respondent B)

There were a few remarks however about how and why an image would have a bigger impact on them when comparing it with a review.

- “I don’t really know, but maybe a picture would influence me more. Anybody can write anything.” (Respondent F)
- “Yes me too, images have bigger influence on me.” (Respondent A)
- “Both influences me but it depends. If it’s about the fact that something is dirty images are important to check if it’s true.” (Respondent C)

Other remarks suggested that these two forms of content have an equal amount of influence on users. It all depends on the circumstances which one they would consider more in the given moment.

- “Yes, it is good to know how the place looks. But you can Photoshop an image and you can write anything down so they are the same for me.” (Respondent K)
- “Images are more like “hard-fact” evidences, while comments can describe the feeling that the customer experienced that cannot always be conveyed by an image.” (Respondent E)

Do you ever think about looking at who made the review? Does it matter for you?

Respondents mostly said that they usually do not think about checking who wrote the review, most of the time they just scroll through the comments to get a general idea.

- “I never check who made the review I’m such a lazy person” (Respondent A)

Some people however, mentioned that it matters for them, especially if they find the review out of the ordinary. In this case, they would like to know more about the source of that comment.

- “Yes, it matters for me. I sometimes check the authors of really complaining bad reviews.” (Respondent D)
- “Only if it sounds really weird and it’s in contrary to all the other comments.” (Respondent C)
Sometimes I look at it, just to check the reliability of that person”
   (Respondent L)

Inevitably, the topic of fake reviews also came up during the dialogue. On average, respondents were aware of the phenomenon of fake reviews, but were not “afraid” of it, because as they mentioned previously during the discussion, they felt like they could judge originality of reviews by themselves.

- “You know there are also some Russian agencies who can bump your ratings with some “real comments”... of course fake ones... but written by real people. They are hired to write comments.” (Respondent I)

Have you ever shared anything on TripAdvisor? If yes what, and if not, what would motivate you to do it?

In connection with participating in UGC creation on the TripAdvisor website, people mostly mentioned that they are either too lazy to do it, or they always forget. In general, most of them were not very motivated to share their experience on this particular platform.

- “I am too lazy to leave reviews. I always think that there are already too many reviews without mine, so nobody needs my opinion.” (Respondent B)

One person mentioned that she is motivated by helping out other people. Since she finds it useful to read others’ comments, occasionally she also leaves some remarks about her stay.

- “I always try to leave a review when I don’t forget, because these reviews always help me a lot, so I also want to help other people by sharing my experience.” (Respondent G)

Only a few participants were exceptionally motivated to participate and leave reviews, share opinions. It was an interesting observation that even though their perception about other people is that they mostly leave negative reviews or like to complain, they mentioned only leaving positive reviews.

- “I don’t really grade places that I’ve been to with a negative rating or comment. I have never done it. I only do the positive ones, because those have some extra
value. And I ask the owner all the time where can I rate you, because I had a good
time and I want to show it to other people.” (Respondent J)

- “I always like to comment if I have some positive experience. In case of negative
experience, I do not comment. I just get over it.” (Respondent E)

I tried to ask people who were not motivated to participate, what would make them leave
a comment after all. The most typical response to this question was in line with the
following quote:

- “The only thing that would motivate me to post a review is if something unusual
happened. Like if something was so good, or maybe if something was very bad.”
(Respondent F)

Short summary of results in this section:

- First associating with TripAdvisor was restaurant recommendations.
- General perception is that the company provides good service for travelers.
- Respondents highlighted the exceptional search engine optimization of the firm, and
how their offers always come out on top in connection with travel related searches.
- For some people TripAdvisor was a primary source of researching travel related
UGC, but not for all. However, everyone agreed that TripAdvisor is always a good
backup to turn to, in case you need additional information.
- Some interviewees admitted they would be willing to change their travel plans based
on TripAdvisor reviews.
- People like to check on truthfulness of MGC with the help of UGC on TripAdvisor.
- The size of the reference group recommending something has a big role in creating
trust – and TripAdvisor has this power with the amount of recommendations on the
website.
- A regular perception was that people only like to complain when leaving a review.
Consequently participants felt like they would not be influenced by negative reviews
and they prefer positive ones. However, pointing out the importance of reference
group size once again, a large amount of negative reviews would have the influence
of changing plans.
- Other respondent did not care about sentiment; they cared more about the quality
information present in the reviews.
- Visual content on TripAdvisor has an insignificant influence on consumers.
- Respondents mostly did not check the person behind the comment on TripAdvisor. They are aware of the presence of fake reviews, but they are not concerned too much about it. They believe they are “smart enough” to distinguish between a fake and a real comment.

7.1.3. Discussion of examples

These pictures were shown to observe whether participants change their opinions about certain topics when encountered with a real life example. I aspired to observe how they are influenced by a positive and negative review, whether they look at the visual content on the website, and which type of content they feel more influenced by: written or visual. After this, I tried to reveal their thoughts about possible fake reviews, or whether they took into consideration the persona behind a review at all. I also tried to find out if they are more influenced by UGC or MGC.

Discussion on Figure 6 and Figure 7

(Figure 6: High number of reviews, higher price)
In the next dialogue, we can observe in how many different ways people start with making a decision. Someone looked at the price, another respondent considered the rating and how many people reviewed it, and others would go for the visual content.

- “I am looking at the price right now. Because this one is cheaper and the hotel looks modern and it’s pretty nice.” (Respondent B)
- “I haven’t even seen the price. I looked at the picture and I looked at the star rating. And how many people rated it.” (Respondent D)
- “Where do you even see that? The rating out of five was the first thing that caught my attention. Also, if I was actually on the website I would have scrolled through a couple of the pictures.” (Respondent I)
- “Yeah I also always look at the pictures.” (Respondent I)
- “Me too... the pictures.” (Respondent C)

In the end, the overall discussions came to the conclusion, that although they do look at how many people reviewed it, they don’t care as much about that aspect as the price or the images. Even though Figure 7 had lower number of reviews, people still went for it because it was cheaper and the pictures showed a decent quality accommodation. However, one respondent mentioned that maybe it would change her decision “if only 3 people reviewed it”. This shows that when making a decision, the size of the reference group still matters up to a point, but not above a certain number.
Discussion on subjective negative review in Figure 8

All respondents realized that this review was highly subjective and did not give any real information they could use for their decision. They immediately dismissed the reviewer by claims like “he is just upset”. Even though the review was highly negative in sentiment, none of the respondents said that this review would influence their final decision.

- “I would read more reviews.” (Respondent K)
- “I would read more. I wouldn’t trust this one for his word.” (Respondent H)
- “Bad and good are so subjective. For me bad can be that there is an elevator, and for someone else bad is that there is no elevator. So I would not take this comment into consideration. Because I don’t know what this guy is thinking about good and bad in his life.” (respondent A)
- “And he says that it’s just bad, but there are no reason why he says that it was bad.” (Respondent I)
- “He is just upset.” (Respondent C)
- “The author should have indicated what he or she expected from this room. These kind of comments are not so reliable.” (Respondent J)

Discussion on objective positive review in Figure 9
In the next dialogue, we can clearly see that respondents are more influenced by Figure 9. They appreciate that the review is more objective and gives them information that is more valuable. Some of them consider it more honest, although one person mentions that “it’s too positive”, so it must be a fake review. Overall, we can say that there is more trust toward this review.

- “I think this is an honest one.” (Respondent G)
- “It’s like someone is payed to say this. It’s too positive.” (Respondent F)
- “NO! It is not too positive... Such kind of comments are mostly objective, because she tried to show the negative and positive side as well. This comment is more positive because she mentioned that it exceeded their expectations.” (Respondent J)
- “It is much better because it gives you a lot more information than the first one. The important part of the review is when she says that the hotel exceeded our expectations” (Respondent A)

Discussion on objective negative review in Figure 10

In the following dialogue, we can see attitudes toward the objective negative review. During discussion, it was interesting to observe that even though this comment is not based only on emotion, some respondents were still ready to dismiss it only because it was negative in sentiment. They were so convinced that people like to complain too much that they ignored information about nightlife and police action in the area. Other than that, most of the interview participants agreed that Figure 9 and Figure 10 gave them useful information that they can use for their final decision.
“His comment is a bit subjective because he says “toilet smelled” and “it was ridiculously small”. I do not know what for him is ridiculously small and what a smell is for him. Because some people are very sensitive. Also, what is bad neighborhood... what does that mean...?” (Respondent B)

“No but he said that there is a street nightlife and the whole area behind the square is a very bad neighborhood. Lots of people sleeping on the streets and police coming.” (Respondent H)

“If you compare the previous one and this one, you already have a general view of what you should expect.” (Respondent D)

Another observation worth mentioning is that one respondent already brought up the question of review personas, and that he would take into consideration this aspect as well.

The two negative reviews had 22 contributions and feedbacks, and the positive one had 211. So it actually depends on the person what they are looking for and what kind of traveler they are I think. (Respondent L)

Change in attitudes after seeing review personas in Figure 11, Figure 12 and Figure 13

(Figure 11: Subjective negative review persone)
Even though we already knew most respondent would not bother checking who wrote a certain review, it was interesting to see how they reacted when they were shown the profiles. The next section is an extract from one of the discussions.

- “What is the last comment he posted... oh okay... This one is a very negative person. I mean he always writes negative things... no... I do not like that person. I hate that person.” (Respondent K)
- “I would not disregard this person; he had a negative experience for some reason.” (Respondent F)
- “Yeah but it’s also about the reason... “Bathroom was ridiculously small” like did you want to spend your whole day in the bathroom? I do not think that is valid I am sorry, not for me. Some of his reasons are kind of ridiculous so it’s not very valid for me I am sorry.” (Respondent A)
The information included on the profiles (picture, description, number of contributions, last comment) also mattered for the respondents.

- “It can be fake account because there is no picture.” (Respondent C)
- “Well, that one is... the little rat from the ice age (referring to the profile picture) so you don't get much info about them.” (Respondent J)
- “This guy with two contributions is really new. I would trust the one who had more contributions, because it means she had more experience and has an idea about what is good or what is bad.” (Respondent H)

Even though profiles clearly influenced attitudes of most participants, one or two respondents expressed doubt and indifference.

- “After checking the profiles I still not convinced about either opinion, I still don't know anything about the persons and their needs. If they write 100 reviews it doesn't mean that they are right about it.” (Respondent E)

**Comparison of hotel management and customer photos in Figure 14 and Figure 15**

(Figure 14: Room photo posted by hotel management)
Even from previous discussion, it was clear that people would trust customer photos and content of other users over the content posted by the management. In this case, with the examples shown results did not differ from the previous conversation. After seeing the image posted by the customer, they immediately dismissed the possibility of booking in that hotel.

Comparing attitudes toward written review versus visual content in Figure 16 and Figure 17
People gave very diverse answers in this case. The overall conclusion was that even though the room looked clean on the photo taken by the customer, they would still avoid booking this hotel.

- “Well the comment is complaining about smell... you can’t see smell.” (Respondent F)
- “Well... this looks clean but still can smell like an ashtray! I need to smell it! People are confusing me.” (Respondent B)
- “I would consider that some of the rooms in the hotel are bad, but some are good and it really depends on which one I would get. I would avoid booking this hotel.” (Respondent K)

Short summary of results in this section:

- More importance was given to price and pictures on a hotel profile than to number of reviews or ratings
- Subjective negative comment was completely dismissed
- Respondents appreciate a more objective review, however in case of the negative sentiment objective review; people were so focused on the negativity that they were ready to dismiss it, even though it contained useful information about the neighborhood.
- In the case of the positive review, there was suspicion of a fake comment.
- Interviewees did care about personas. Important influencing factors were expertise, picture and description of profile and also attitude of last contribution.
- Image from customer was more trusted than image from management
- Written review mattered more as opposed to the photo.

### 7.2. Discussion of online social listening report with Sentione

As I mentioned in the methodology part of my thesis, I created two projects with the Sentione software. It will provide extra information about online content related to TripAdvisor. These findings will complement the results I will have from the focus group interview and give us extra insight about the online conversation surrounding the brand. Sentione is a tool that has a special algorithm. This algorithm assembles and evaluates all online messages, sentiments and discussion that includes a specific keyword.
The first project I created within the Sentione panel is a very simple one. It is pulling any mention from the internet that has the brand name in it. Sentione is working with numerous sources (platforms, blogs, social media, forums, news portals, review sites and other sources from everywhere around the World Wide Web). The aim of the first project was to look at general brand awareness and brand health. Furthermore, we can see the attitude and sentiment of the online community toward TripAdvisor.

Figure 18: Sentiment share and brand health of Project 1

The sentiment setup determines if online comments are positive, negative or neutral. They use human proficiency and an advanced technology that analyzes language in order to be able to display accurately how the relevant topic is received in the online community.

If we look at this Sentiment analysis and brand health indicator, we can see that the percentage of positive and neutral mentions are overwhelming. Only a very small share of mentions were negative in the last 30 days. According to the report, this constitutes as an overall 0.87 score in the brand health index.
Since the report is so overwhelmingly positive, I wanted to take a look what causes that small amount of negative attitude online.

**Figure 19: Most popular negative mentions of Project 1**

![Twitter post](https://i.imgur.com/123456789.png)

*(Source: Sentione - content-based web analytics platform)*

I have found out that the most popular negative mentions were about a recent news story in connection with a scandal TripAdvisor is facing. This is concerning ethical issues and social responsibility, therefore based on these negative sentiment mentions; we cannot make any conclusions about consumer sentiment regarding the usefulness of the service provided.

**Figure 20: Source analysis of Project 1**

![Source analysis chart](https://i.imgur.com/987654321.png)

*(Source: Sentione - content-based web analytics platform)*
In the source analysis report we can see where the discussions took place and in what form. Reviews mentioning or connected to the brand are an overwhelming majority. This shows us that as far as user-generated content creation is concerned, consumers participate mainly in written review creation. The second biggest part of the pie where the brand was involved in mentions was Instagram posts.

Figure 21: Source analysis 2 of Project 1

(Source: Sentione - content-based web analytics platform)

In the next figure, we can observe where those reviews were written exactly. We can clearly see that they were posted directly on TripAdvisor websites of the respective countries. This again suggests a big participation in UGC and utilization of TripAdvisor services. The sentiment analysis shows us, that the number of negative reviews posted on the site is a small fraction compared to the positive or neutral sentiment ones. This suggests that users are more likely to share a positive opinion, or one that provides additional information for fellow travelers in order to help them out (attribute-value review). I have already mentioned in the methodological part of my thesis that I have created a second project on the Sentione panel, in order to have a more clear picture of actual consumer sentiment toward the company. In this project, I excluded all domains of
TripAdvisor websites and the URLs of the social media sites of the company. This way I tried to exclude anything that the company might say or share about themselves.

Figure 22: Sentiment share of Project 2

![Sentiment share of Project 2](image)

(Source: Sentione - content-based web analytics platform)

We can see that in this case, the number of positive sentiment mentions decreased compared to the neutral ones, but the share of negative mentions remained almost the same as in Project 1. The differences between the sentiments of Project 1 and Project 2 are clear. We can draw the conclusion that the bigger share of positive sentiment is caused by the presence of self-promoting posts on TripAdvisor social media pages and it seems like the share of positive sentiment reviews on the websites are bigger. Consumers in general have mostly neutral sentiment in their communication toward the brand.

Figure 23: Sources analysis of Project 2

![Sources analysis of Project 2](image)

(Source: Sentione - content-based web analytics platform)
Observing the sources, we can discover that with the exclusion of TripAdvisor website reviews from the mentions, there is a high preference among consumers to share their experiences on Instagram and tag TripAdvisor in the description. This shows that they consider TripAdvisor as a relevant company and brand in connection with their travel experience. This also suggests a high motivation to share travel experiences in visual format.

Figure 24: Sources analysis comparison of Project 1 (TripAdvisor) and Project 2 (TripAdvisor domains excluded)

On this figure, we can more clearly see the already mentioned dramatic difference between the source analysis of Project 1 and Project 2. Overall content and mentions on the web in connection with TripAdvisor are predominantly travel reviews, but in case we exclude TripAdvisor domains and concentrate on consumer posts in online communities, we can observe a sudden increase in the share of visual content shared on Instagram.
We can observe similar patterns on the keyword clouds as before. In Project 1, the most important associations in connection with the brand are travel review, destinations, restaurants, book, report, rate, tour, hotel and experience. More or less this is an accurate description of what TripAdvisor offers in its list of services. One interesting thing to observe on this keyword cloud, that the word “best” is included here, which suggests an incredibly positive brand image. In Project 2 is exactly what we would expect as well, based on earlier observations. In most popular keywords of the mentions, we can see the most used Instagram hashtags that users put alongside TripAdvisor such as: travel photography, travel blogger, photo of the day and wanderlust. A very interesting thing in the keyword cloud of Project 2 is that Airbnb is also mentioned. Upon further investigation, I have found that this happens because alongside the TripAdvisor hashtag, people also put and Airbnb hashtag in the description of the Instagram photos.
8. Analysis

8.1. Research question:

How user-generated content (UGC) on TripAdvisor is affecting the decision-making process of the leisure traveler?

I have identified seven sub-questions to my research question. All these sub-questions will result in answering the main research question of the thesis.

Sub questions include:

- Do consumers consider UGC in their decision-making?
  - **Sub-question 1**: How important is UGC when making a decision?
  - **Sub-question 2**: In which stages of decision-making process does UGC affect consumers more?

- In what specific ways UGC on TripAdvisor is influencing travel purchase decisions?
  - **Sub-question 3**: Do they prefer UGC to marketer generated content (MGC)?
  - **Sub-question 4**: Do they prefer written reviews to visual content?
  - **Sub-question 5**: Do they consider positive or negative reviews more?
  - **Sub-question 6**: How do consumers participate in UGC creation? What are the possible motivations behind participation?
  - **Sub-question 7**: Do they consider the person behind the created content? Does it affect credibility of the post/review?

In the following analysis, I will answer all sub-questions based on my primary research, and compare results with the overviewed theoretical framework.
8.2. Sub-question 1: How important is UGC when making a decision?

According to my findings, we can conclude that UGC is very important in the decision-making process of consumers; however, it is not the most important factor.

The number one thing driving all the decisions is the budget. This claim is supported by my theoretical framework:

_I have found that according to the survey of Deloitte, 59% of respondents said that the number one decision criteria they consider about their choice is the price._ (Papakonstantinou, 2016)

I have found this to be true for frequent and non-frequent travelers as well. Non-frequent travelers usually do not have a big budget put aside for these purposes. Frequent travelers have a bigger budget, because they see travel as a priority. For this reason, they would like to organize as many trips as possible, thus they would like to save on each trip, so they have remaining budget for the next one. Furthermore, travelers are restricted by their free time as well. Thus, the two most important factors travelers take into consideration are available budget and travel dates.

One more thing people consider before turning to UGC is word-of-mouth by family and friends. Normally they would ask experiences and opinions of their loved-ones before anyone else. Of course, these opinions can also come in the form of two types of UGC: eWOM or images on social media. Only after these sources of information, can other forms of UGC come into play. When starting to search for UGC in the planning process, multiple respondents mentioned TripAdvisor as their first choice.

Importance of WOM and especially eWOM can be seen in this quote of my theoretical framework:

_With so many available choices, it is more difficult than ever to make a purchase decision. That is why people like to turn to their peers for advice. This way eWOM is aiding customers to make an informed decision._ (Naz, 2014)
8.3. Sub-question 2: In which stage of the decision-making process does UGC affect consumers more?

User-generated content can play a very influential role in consumers’ purchase decision on each stage of the decision-making process. However, according to my main findings during the focus group discussions, people mostly talked about actively searching for UGC during the second and third stages (information search and evaluation of alternatives). They can still encounter this content non-voluntarily, but that is not as influential on their decisions as when they are proactively seeking for these messages. When encountering UGC about travel online, people have a wide range of reactions starting from joy of imagining being there to being annoyed and jealous of other people. This topic in general created strong emotional reactions in respondents.

My theoretical framework supports the influence in the information search phase of decision-making:

In terms of travel purchase decisions, in the information search phase user-generated content has the biggest influence. (Mitev and Markos-Kujbus, 2013) Because travel products are so intangible, consumers very much rely on UGC, mainly because the posted information is regarded as an independent source. A research attempted with users of TripAdvisor established that the most favored action online was travelers checking discussion of other travelers. (Alcazar, Pinero and Maya, 2014)

My theoretical framework supports the influence in the evaluation of alternatives phase of decision-making:

Furthermore, UGC makes it easier for consumers to make a decision by helping them to assess a shortlist of chosen options. This can also be connected to third-party review sites such as TripAdvisor. (Kennel and Rushton, 2015)

As already mentioned, WOM from friends and family is superior to other types of user-generated content. However, in most cases our family have not yet traveled to the destination we would like to visit. According to respondents, the next stage in the information search is to look for UGC and try to educate ourselves about our options. Here the main aim is to gather as many details and options as possible. This is a stage
where many choices can enter into our initial consideration set, this is where we are more receptive of all the facts we find online.

My theoretical framework supports the influence of UGC helping brands enter the consideration set. This quote is a good example of this:

*This is the stage of further research, including further brands into the consideration set, or eliminating them based on the research.* (Satell, 2015) Approximately 66.6% of the touchpoints here contain “consumer driven touchpoints” for example WOM (both electronic and in person) or online information published by peers. (Court, et al., 2009)

During travel planning, some people go first for the destination; some go for the cheapest option no matter the destination. As observed, my respondents from outside of EU are more restricted in their planning due to having to consider applying for visa as a first step. People inside of the EU can be more flexible with the choice of destination.

For some people TripAdvisor was a primary source of researching travel related UGC, but not for all. However, everyone agreed that TripAdvisor is always a good backup to turn to, in case you need additional information. According to respondents, TripAdvisor is usually “unavoidable” due to its exceptional search engine optimization. Even if they did not think of using the website in the beginning of their journey, when they did a simple search on the web about any travel related topic, they surely ended up using it since TripAdvisor links are always the first ones among results. The general perception about the site was that it provides good service for travelers. The size of the reference group recommending something has a big role in creating trust—and TripAdvisor has this power with the amount of recommendations on the website. In connection with how they usually utilize TripAdvisor, the first association of respondents was restaurant recommendations.

The next quote from my theoretical framework supports my findings about importance of a bigger reference group:

*According to Park (2008) and Lee (2008), if there is a bigger reference group recommending a product or service, the perceived popularity of the brand will be increasing, causing an increase in brand preference.*
Facebook groups, where there is a strong user-community of experienced travelers who share their tips and tricks are also a preferred source of UGC.

My theoretical framework, as shown by this quote also supports the finding where we see the motivation of user communities:

*A platform where they communicate ideas also makes them feel like they are a part of a community. (Bonhomme, Christodoulides, and Jevons, 2010.)*

### 8.4. Sub-question 3: Do consumers prefer UGC or MGC?

My conclusion according to the responses I have received during the discussions is that UGC is perceived as more trustworthy. Consumers feel like their peers share a more wholesome picture of their experience. They tell the good and the bad. They feel that MGC never indicates the negative aspects of a particular choice, since the marketers’ interest is to show their products in the most favorable light. Thus, they would never indicate the downsides.

I have found that respondents do not like when they feel like they are recommended something for monetary gains – meaning if they feel like the person recommending something has an interest in the sales numbers. They immediately trust this information source less than UGC, because UGC is supposed to be more neutral. They even mentioned content from social media influencers, and how companies use them as a tool for promoting their products and services. However, since it has become such a widely used practice, consumers do not consider influencers as “one of them” anymore, and they trust these messages less and less.

My theoretical framework supports my claims about perceived trustworthiness of UGC, as shown by this quote:

*UGC and eWOM was not always considered trustworthy, however these information sources are thought to be more credible now than information coming from a marketing department. This phenomenon can be observed more acutely in the case of frequent travelers. Information coming from a marketing department is called Marketer Generated Content (MGC). Therefore, we can say that UGC is more trusted than MGC.*

(Kennel and Rushton, 2015)
Frequent travelers have a routine of planning, for this reason; they do not really consider marketer generated content for purchase. However, some respondents admitted to consider offers even if it is a marketer generated content. They justified this choice with saying that most of the time these offers are ready-made vacation packages, where you do not have to spend time on planning everything for yourself. Researching UGC and planning everything for yourself is highly time-consuming. So based on this we can conclude that when respondents do consider offers thanks to marketer-generated content is for reasons of lack of time and laziness. Additional reasoning include that organized trips are perceived to be cheaper by some people.

However, even when considering offers discovered via MGC content, respondents admitted to check up on trustworthiness by reading some reviews from other consumers. This further proves the statement that people trust information received via UGC more than via MGC.

**8.5. Sub-question 4: Do consumers prefer written reviews to visual content?**

In this topic, my respondents expressed that most of the time they do not check specifically such visual content that was posted by users. They do check images, but they do not differentiate or search only for images posted by users. This would suggest that visual UGC of TripAdvisor has an insignificant influence on consumers. Some quotes would suggest that in some cases images have a bigger influence on purchase decision. However, when the example was shown at the end of the interview, all people were equally deterred from booking the room due to the written review. Thus, I conclude that that written reviews have bigger influence on purchase decision.

**8.6. Sub-question 5: Do consumers consider positive or negative reviews more?**

According to my findings respondents preferred positive reviews to negative ones. Their perception was that people like to complain too much about everything. Because of that, they were ready to dismiss any comment with a negative sentiment with remarks like “he is just upset”. They did not seem to take negative reviews seriously. They did mention,
that in case a listing had too many negative comments, they would be influenced in their decision, since “this many people just cannot be wrong”. Thus, I conclude that the size of the reference group has bigger influence then the sentiment of the review.

It is important to note, that when they said “positive reviews”, most of the time respondent meant attribute-value reviews. They mentioned that they consider something as a “positive review” in case there are sufficient amount of details and facts they care about included in the comment. Based on this I conclude that useful facts included in a comment has bigger effect on the consumer than the sentiment of the review.

However, there were cases where people dismissed a comment even though it contained useful information about the neighborhood. In this case, the comment included statements that were highly negative in sentiment. For this reason, according to my focus group discussion results, I conclude that people can still dismiss an attribute-value comment if it contains negative emotions.

My theoretical framework somewhat supports my findings, according to these quotes:
*Online opinions have two types: attribute-value (factual) reviews, and simple-recommendation reviews that are based more on subjectivity. Factual reviews have higher significance when it comes to decision-making. (Park and Lee, 2008)*
*An Ipsos study revealed that out of those buyers who had a negative incident happening to them, 52% talked about it with their acquaintances, whereas out of those who had a positive incident happening to them, 56% shared it. (Skift, n.d.)*

**8.7. Sub-question 6: How do consumers participate in UGC creation? What are the possible motivations behind participation?**

In general, I have found out from my respondents that if they share something online, they mostly share images on Instagram. This finding aligns with what I have found out with the help of online social listening tool, Sentione.

In the case of TripAdvisor, respondents said that they are either too lazy to leave a comment or they always forget. Those who share are motivated by helping other people with additional information. They feel this is important, since they are also helped in their
decisions by the comments of others. In this case, the aspect of user community is a motivating factor.

My theoretical framework supports my findings about being motivated by the community factor to share experiences:

Motives for participating in eWOM can be very diverse. That motivation can be for example the desire to be involved with a certain brand, having concern for others, or wanting to help the company. People can search for or post online content because they want to seek/provide help for purchase decisions. (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2004)

During the interview, it was an interesting observation, that respondents talked about only sharing positive experiences online, and meanwhile they had the perception that everyone else only liked to complain. My research through Sentione suggests that users share mostly positive or neutral reviews on TripAdvisor and my focus group interview research also confirms this. Yet my respondents had the perception of people sharing mostly negative reviews – a claim that is contradictory to my conclusions.

Those respondents, who claimed they never share anything on TripAdvisor, said that they would be motivated only in case something happened to them that is out of the ordinary. They would be motivated to share an extremely good, or an extremely bad experience.

8.8. Sub-question 7: Do consumers consider the person who created the content? Does it affect credibility?

According to my findings and comments of my respondents, most people do not even think about clicking to check out the person behind the reviews on TripAdvisor. I have found that the biggest reason behind this is that TripAdvisor does not include a lot of information on these user profiles.

However, people do care, and it does influence them in their perception of the reviews in case they know a little more about the person behind it. During the last part of the interview it turned out that, the most important things respondents considered was expertise (in this case it means how many contributions this person had on the website already). Another important influencing factor was when they checked the last review
they left. If they thought the person tended to complain a lot, they dismissed his/her review altogether.

My findings are in line with my theoretical framework:

*We can see that when it comes to the image of communicator, source credibility is a very important determining factor. Whether they will be seen as credible, it is the question of their trustworthiness and previous experience/expertise.* (Mitev and Markos-Kujbus, 2013)

*According to Cheung (2010) and Thadani (2010), influencing factors of trustworthiness of the communicator is expertise.*

Of course, the topic of fake reviews was brought up as well. It seems like respondents were aware of the existence of fake reviews, but they were not too concerned. I have found that the main reason for this, is that they feel like they are “smart enough” to judge for themselves which reviews might be fake and which ones they can trust. This generation is so technologically savvy and so confident in their research skills online, that they were not troubled by the possible presence of a fake review.
Table 7: Summary of findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question: How user-generated content (UGC) on TripAdvisor is affecting the decision-making process of the leisure traveler?</th>
<th>SUMMARY OF FINDINGS</th>
<th>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-question 1</td>
<td>UGC has high importance, but the following factors have bigger priority in the eyes of customers: budget, time available, WOM from friends and family</td>
<td>Theoretical framework supports my findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-question 2</td>
<td>UGC has the biggest influence on decisions in the information search and evaluation of alternatives stages Out of all third-party review sites, TripAdvisor was considered most influential, mainly because of its advanced SEO and high number of people posting reviews on the website.</td>
<td>Theoretical framework supports my findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-question 3</td>
<td>UGC is considered more trustworthy MGC can influence consumers’ decision for reasons of convenience (researching UGC can be time consuming) Even if services offered by MGC is considered for purchase, quality is checked by researching reviews of previous customers</td>
<td>Theoretical framework supports my findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-question 4</td>
<td>Consumers are more influenced in their purchase decision by a written review rather than an image.</td>
<td>Gap in academic research on this topic in connection with TripAdvisor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-question 5</td>
<td>Size of the reference group has bigger influence on the consumer than the sentiment of the review. Attribute-value nature of reviews has bigger effect on consumers than the sentiment of the review. However, in my research sample some respondents were so convinced that people like to complain too much, that they were ready to dismiss an attribute-value review because of negative sentiment.</td>
<td>Theoretical framework somewhat supports my findings. Deviation: People are quick to dismiss negative reviews due to people’s perceived proneness to rather complain than praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-question 6</td>
<td>In general most people share their travel experience on Instagram via visual content (Supported by Sentione findings) On TripAdvisor most people are not motivated to share Main motivations of people who share: helping user community by sharing useful information, sharing a positive experience, (Supported by Sentione findings), sharing an experience that is out of the ordinary</td>
<td>Theoretical framework supports my findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-question 7</td>
<td>TripAdvisor users rarely check review personas. Most important factor they consider is expertise of the user. Respondents were aware of the existence of fake reviews; however, they were not concerned and rather confident in their skills to find out if an information source is trustworthy.</td>
<td>Theoretical framework supports my findings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Conclusion

In this thesis work, I aimed to answer the following research question: How user-generated content (UGC) on TripAdvisor is affecting the decision-making process of the leisure traveler.

In order to do this, first I have looked at academic research in the relevant topics. I looked at all the user-generated content related concepts like prosumption, UGC, co-creation and eWOM. I examined the effects of UGC on companies and consumers. I searched for current travel trends, consumer behavior in travel planning, along with the role of TripAdvisor in tourism. I investigated the presence of UGC in consumer decision-making for travel purchase (Including the traditional 5-stages model as well as the McKinsey consumer decision journey).

In order to thoroughly answer my research question, I have come up with seven sub-question. All these sub-questions will result in answering the main research question of the thesis.

Sub questions include:

- Do consumers consider UGC in their decision-making?
  - **Sub-question 1:** How important is UGC when making a decision?
  - **Sub-question 2:** In which stages of decision-making process does UGC affect consumers more?
- In what specific ways UGC on TripAdvisor is influencing travel purchase decisions?
  - **Sub-question 3:** Do they prefer UGC to marketer generated content (MGC)?
  - **Sub-question 4:** Do they prefer written reviews to visual content?
  - **Sub-question 5:** Do they consider positive or negative reviews more?
  - **Sub-question 6:** How do consumers participate in UGC creation? What are the possible motivations behind participation?
  - **Sub-question 7:** Do they consider the person behind the created content? Does it affect credibility of the post/review?
In order to answer these sub-questions, as primary research I have chosen a qualitative research method: the focus group interview. I also used the online social listening tool Sentione as a complementary tool for research, to provide additional insights.

With the help of these tools, I have concluded the following:

Sub-question 1: UGC has high importance, but the following factors have bigger priority in the eyes of customers: budget, time available, WOM from friends and family

Sub-question 2: UGC has the biggest influence on decisions in the information search and evaluation of alternatives stages. Out of all third-party review sites, TripAdvisor was considered most influential, mainly because of its advanced SEO and high number of people posting reviews on the website.

Sub-question 3: UGC is considered more trustworthy than MGC. MGC can influence consumers’ decision for reasons of convenience (researching UGC can be time consuming). Even if services offered by MGC is considered for purchase, quality is checked by researching reviews of previous customers.

Sub-question 4: Consumers are more influenced in their purchase decision by a written review rather than an image.

Sub-question 5: Size of the reference group has bigger influence on the consumer than the sentiment of the review. Attribute-value nature of reviews has bigger effect on consumers than the sentiment of the review. However, in my research sample some respondents were so convinced that people like to complain too much, that they were ready to dismiss an attribute-value review because of negative sentiment.

Sub-question 6: in general, most people share their travel experience on Instagram via visual content (Supported by Sentione findings). On TripAdvisor, most people are not motivated to share. Main motivations of people who share: helping user community by sharing useful information, sharing a positive experience, (Supported by Sentione findings), sharing an experience that is out of the ordinary

Sub-question 7: TripAdvisor users rarely check review personas. Most important factor they consider is expertise of the user. Respondents were aware of the existence of fake reviews; however, they were not concerned and rather confident in their skills to find out if an information source is trustworthy.
Opportunity for further research:

Although qualitative research is useful for a deeper understanding of consumer attitudes and opinions, it has its limitations. The most important limitation is the small number of the sample we have to be working with. In order to be able to have an answer that is more conclusive when it comes to the general population of leisure travelers, we would need to conduct a quantitative research in the topic.

Due to convenience sampling, the findings of this research can only be understood for people in Generation Y (Millennials). I have chosen this generation, due to its willingness and purchasing power to spend on travel products. However, motivations and travel decision-making process of the next generation (Generation Z) would also soon be relevant to examine. In the upcoming decade, they will be the more relevant segment in this topic of research.

The topics that I would recommend to further research with the help of quantitative analysis is whether consumers are influenced more by written or visual content of TripAdvisor; and whether they are influenced more by negative or positive recommendations. I believe in these questions we would be able to get results that are more conclusive with the help of a bigger sample.
10. Referencing


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