THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ONLINE CONSUMER REVIEWS AND FIRMS' INTERVENTIONS FROM THREE ACTORS' PERSPECTIVES

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"It's always seems impossible until it's done"

\-   Nelson Mandela   -

For my husband and my two wonderful sons:

None of this is possible without your endless love and supports

Abstract

The World Tourism Organisation reports that 90 per cent of consumers read online consumer reviews before making a purchase decision, with 83 per cent admitting that the reviews influence them. Adding to the knowledge that reviews are a significant source of information in tourist decision making due to a high level of perceived trust compared to advertising, sheds some light on the importance of online reviews on the decision-making process. Online reviews are the manifestation of customer engagement behaviour, which contains customers' assessment of the company's service quality, as a result of their comparison between their expectation of the service and the actual service quality received. Therefore, they can also be used by companies as a source of information about the market.

Acknowledging the importance of online consumer reviews for consumers' decision-making processes, many companies have decided to become more active by responding to reviews. Some research suggests that this initiative has successfully enabled companies to gain a competitive advantage by nurturing customer engagement behaviour and enhancing consumer perception of service quality. Companies' engagement with reviews can also be used as an avenue for service recovery. However, contrasting results suggest that negative effects can occur because consumers feel disturbed and see the response as a defensive mechanism from the company.

Whilst there is much literature on the views of tourists on reviews and companies' responses, there is hardly any addressing the perspectives of the firms being reviewed. This represents an important omission, since they are key actors, contributing communication into the online review platform. Further, additional research should also be conducted to acknowledge the interaction between both positive and negative influence on consumers behaviour. The existing literature mainly concludes that reviews and responses have positive or negative effects, which do not represent the real situation faced by all actors in the environment. The current thesis addresses these by conducting qualitative research, which is also lacking in the literature.

Taking the view that meaning is socially constructed, and multiple realities exist, the thesis explores the perspectives of three groups of participants using a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. The researcher conducted 31 interviews with reviewers, 21 interviews with potential guests and 12 interviews with hotel firms. After applying thematic analysis as suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006), the thesis concludes that online consumer reviews and hospitality firms' responses have yielded five paradoxes in an online environment. These paradoxes are caused by the effects arising

from the interaction between consumer reviews and hospitality firms' responses, as experienced by the three actors.

This thesis contributes to the theory on reviews as an information source and search processes by highlighting the paradoxes caused by the positive and negative impacts of online reviews and hospitality firms' responses simultaneously. The thesis also contributes to the theory about the ways reviews and responses are understood and evaluated by highlighting the links to self-concept theory for the first time. Furthermore, the thesis contributes to theories of service quality gaps by revising the service quality model from Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985). This thesis also contributes to theories of motivation in online engagement activity in word-of-mouth and the theory on the impact of hospitality firms' responses on consumers. Finally, the thesis contributes to the theory about the ways responses to reviews should be created by emphasising the benefits of including para-social interaction in the response, providing some practical suggestions for hospitality firms and marketers in general.

Keywords: online consumer review, hospitality firms' response, firms' intervention, paradoxes, evaluation strategies

Acknowledgement

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Chapter 1.   Introduction

1.1   Background

According to a report from Channel Advisor in 2011, about 90 per cent of online consumers read reviews before making purchasing decisions. About 83 per cent of consumers stated that reviews influenced their decision-making process (Davis and Agrawal, 2018). Similarly, a study by RightNow in 2010 claimed that 78% of British consumers were influenced by online reviews (Casaló *et al.*, 2015a). This happens because reading online reviews can reduce the risk associated with a purchase (Luo and Ye, 2019).

Consumers' reliance on online reviews is greater for service purchases because these cannot be tried before buying and cannot be returned after consumption (Racherla and Friske, 2012). This intangible aspect of travel products is a particular issue (Chung and Koo, 2015) due to the higher perceived risk, higher cost and complex choice criteria (Lin, Jones and Westwood, 2009; Casaló *et al.*, 2015a). This makes online consumer reviews crucial for tourism and hospitality consumers (Ye, Law and Gu, 2009; Berezina *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, Sheldon (1997) and Werthner and Klein (1999) suggest that tourism is an "information-intense industry". Easily accessible travel-related information is very important (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

According to a report by TripAdvisor in 2013, 77% of hospitality consumers read online consumer reviews regularly before booking accommodation and 53% visit a number of different sites before making decisions (Gursoy, 2019). From a 2014 report by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) consumers usually visit 14 different travel-related sites, with almost three visits per site, before making an online reservation. This report also highlights the importance of online consumer reviews in the early stages to identify a consideration set, and in the final phase to narrow choices. From the hospitality firms' perspective, online reviews are useful sources of information for quality management and understanding customers' needs (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2014).

Previous studies have highlighted the heavy reliance of tourists on online consumer reviews. This reliance is probably one of the reasons behind the exponential growth of TripAdvisor, the largest online travel network (O'Connor, 2008). O'Connor (2010) noted that in 2009, TripAdvisor had more than 10 million registered members and had published over 20 million user-generated reviews and opinions on nearly half a million hotels and attractions worldwide. According to a 2014 report from 'The Telegraph' (telegraph.co.uk), this number had increased to 70 million members (Smith, 2014). *About TripAdvisor* (2020) reports an

average 463 million unique visitors monthly, with 860 million reviews and opinions about 6.5 million accommodation providers in 48 countries.

The importance of online consumer reviews has inspired many studies about this topic. These (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004a; B Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006; Buhalis and Law, 2008; Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Parra-López *et al.*, 2011; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014) conclude that reviews have the ability to change tourists' decision-making behaviours. Several studies have also looked at the value of review sites to hospitality firms and concluded that online consumer reviews can influence perceptions of customer expectations (Dellarocas, 2006; Hays, Page and Buhalis, 2013; Cabiddu, Carlo and Piccoli, 2014). Information contained in a review is essential as it could enable companies to provide a service that is as close as possible to customers' expectations, thereby giving them a competitive advantage.

However, several concerns arise because of the characteristics of consumer reviews (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013). The subjective nature of consumers' opinions, as well as the complicated process of evaluation required, are two of the most frequently stated causes for these concerns (Dellarocas, 2003; Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008; Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013). Other concerns are the presence of fake reviews (Keates, 2007; Larson and Denton, 2014; Luca and Zervas, 2016) and paid reviews (Dellarocas, 2006; Ayeh, Au and Law, 2016) which are sometimes used as a type of strategic manipulation (Dellarocas, 2006; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). Additionally, while easy access to information benefits consumers, it can also lead to information overload, a situation where consumers feel overwhelmed by the vast amount of information they receive (Martin and Pu, 2014; Fang *et al.*, 2016; Singh *et al.*, 2017; Park, 2018). This could create unfavourable outcomes for consumers reading numerous reviews.

Despite these limitations, some consumers still prefer online consumer reviews (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013) over a company's advertising because they are seen as a more trustworthy source of information written by fellow consumers (Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay, 2015). Therefore, they have gained increasing popularity among tourists seeking quality assurance (Jeacle and Carter, 2011). In fact, online consumer review sites, such as TripAdvisor, are among the most important external information sources for travellers (Gursoy, 2019). A number of studies have reported that these online reviews and comments are important elements in hospitality consumers' decision making processes (Ye, Law and Gu, 2009; Racherla and Friske, 2012; Sparks, Perkins and Buckley, 2013).

We can see that consumer reviews have yielded several different outcomes for both consumers and hospitality firms which are contradictory. Substantively, these contradictions are already present in the literature. For example, some studies have found that negative reviews damage the hotel's reputation (Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012) and have more power in damaging consumers' perception of service quality than positive reviews (Browning, So and Sparks, 2013). Conversely, Berger, Sorensen and Rasmussen (2010) claim that negative reviews can increase sales, probably because some consumers give more weight to a negative review (Lee and Cranage, 2014; Book *et al.*, 2018) and find them to be more helpful (Eslami, Ghasemaghaei and Hassanein, 2018).

Contradictory findings also emerge in the literature about companies' interventions. These usually accompany online consumer reviews in the form of a response. These replies or comments are often provided by companies in response to the increasing influence of online reviews, in order to try to respond to and shape consumers' perceptions (Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015). Besides gaining competitive advantages, (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008), responding to a review can also nurture customer engagement behaviour (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013) and can be used as a means of service recovery (van Noort and Willemsen, 2011; Xie, Zhang and Zhang, 2014; Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015; Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015; Sparks, So and Bradley, 2016).

Firms' responses can enhance consumers' perceptions of their competence, the service already purchased and the value of the organisation's other offerings (Swansons and Kelley, 2001). In the long term, the value of engaging with online reviews reduces the cost of generating new consumers by retaining existing ones (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987). Company responses can also be seen as a marketing communication tool which can narrow the gap between the expected and experienced quality (Grönroos, 1988).

In contrast to the above-mentioned claims, the literature also suggests that a response to online reviews could have a negative effect (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). This might be because consumers were not waiting for a response (Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015) and might not expect any direct online engagement (Sparks and Bradley, 2014). Furthermore, according to Ashforth and Gibbs (1990), responding to a negative review may also be interpreted as defensive and could alienate potential customers who may then side with complainers. This is why Veil *et al.* (2012) suggest that responding to a threat can be more damaging than ignoring it (Wang, Wezel, and Forgues, 2016).

Because of these contrasting opinions, it is imperative for companies to understand the utilisation of online consumer reviews as well as firms' responses, as external information

sources for consumers, in order to construct an effective marketing communication strategy and service delivery (Gursoy, 2019). In order to obtain a better understanding of these issues, an in-depth investigation of the reviewers (Sparks, So and Bradley, 2016) as well as the hospitality firms and potential tourists (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013) is recommended. According to Wei *et al.* (2013), a simultaneous examination of the three actors is needed, especially in a study which features the dynamic relationship between the three actors.

However, most existing studies (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011; van Noort and Willemsen, 2011; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013; Cheng and Loi, 2014; Xie, Zhang and Zhang, 2014; Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015; Sparks, So and Bradley, 2016) focus only on the potential tourist's point of view. There is a lack of research that accounts for the reviewers' perspectives (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011; Tripp and Grégoire, 2011; Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015), probably because finding reviewers is more difficult than finding people who have read and used reviews to inform their decisions (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011).

Furthermore, even fewer studies have been conducted to investigate companies' points of view (Park and Allen, 2013). This represents an important omission, since they are key actors, contributing communication into the online review space. Furthermore, there is hardly any research integrating all three actors' perspectives, even though it is important to see how they interact with each other after they have been exposed to online consumer reviews and hospitality firms' interventions (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013).

1.2   Research Aims

Several studies have investigated the necessity of companies' interventions and have presented various results. Ma, Sun and Kekre (2015) suggest that service intervention encourages even more complaints in the future. This could be because the reviewer on an online review site is not on the premises waiting for a response (Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015) and may not expect any direct online interaction (Sparks and Bradley, 2014). Therefore service intervention could disturb the interaction among consumers and negatively influence their perceptions (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013).

In contrast, another study (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987) suggests that addressing consumer complaints is crucial for good consumer relationships and can have positive effects (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Brodie *et al.*, 2013).

Additionally, the literature states that the primary motivations of customers to write and post a review are: for enjoyment (hedonic motivation), to push back against the collective power of companies, to vent negative feelings, out of concern for other consumers, to help the

company, to express positive feelings and self-enhancement (Yoo and Gretzel, 2008). Writing a review offers social and hedonic, as well as functional and psychological benefits (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004; Parra-López *et al.*, 2011). Similar motivations emerge for the negative review, however receiving feedback from the company is not one of them. Thus, it is necessary to question whether the company's intervention in this environment is merited. Could it be that both effects, mentioned above, happen at the same time? This research aims to provide greater understanding of this dichotomy.

Based on preliminary observations, the valence of reviews on these websites were quite diverse: from negative to positive. Whilst other studies (Tripp and Grégoire, 2011; van Noort and Willemsen, 2011; Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012; Cheng and Loi, 2014; Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015; Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015; Sparks, So and Bradley, 2016; Wang, Wezel and Forgues, 2016) concentrate solely on investigating one type of valence, in particular the negative, this thesis investigates the effect of hospitality firms' response to both negative and positive reviews. This is essential to conclude whether hospitality firms ought to engage in review platform interaction with customers, especially taking into consideration their limited resources.

Most research investigating hospitality firms' responses has used quantitative methodology, with the majority of studies conducting an experiment (van Noort and Willemsen, 2011; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013; Cheng and Loi, 2014; Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015; Sparks, So and Bradley, 2016). A few qualitative studies are available in the literature which either use content analysis (Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012) or a case study approach (Park and Allen, 2013). In order to explore the interrelationship between reviews and the responses as experienced by all three actors, this thesis applies a qualitative methodology.

A total of 64 semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain information from reviewers, potential consumers, and hotel management. By doing so, as recommended by previous studies (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013; Sparks, So and Bradley, 2016), this thesis incorporates all three actors' perspectives. The results provide recommendations to firms and marketeers on how to effectively handle tourist reviews and suggest which reviews should be prioritised. The results may also benefit consumers because they can use the conclusions in order to avoid information overload and confusion when they evaluate numerous reviews.

Finally, since there are only a limited number of studies which investigate the perspectives of the supply side responses, the thesis argues that further research is needed. The presence

of both positive and negative effects was probably the reason many hotels have used different approaches in responding to online consumer reviews, including giving no response (Park and Allen, 2013), and noted that additional research is needed to investigate effective strategies for a firm's engagement with online review platforms. This study explores hotels' behaviour in responding to reviews, comparing hotels' behaviour and consumers' perception about the response. Strategies are suggested, which can be employed by hotel management in responding to online consumer reviews.

The aim of this study is to explore the interplay between online consumer reviews and companies' intervention, from the perspectives of reviewers, potential guests and hospitality firms.

1.3   Research Questions

In order to achieve this aim, the study focuses on the following research questions:

1. How do reviewers, potential guests and hospitality firms perceive online consumer reviews and companies' response to reviews?
2. What strategies do consumers and hospitality firms employ in interpreting online consumer reviews?
3. How do hospitality firms respond to consumer reviews?
4. What are the implications of the interaction between consumer reviews and hospitality firms' interventions for tourism and service marketing?

Please note that in some places, the thesis uses the term 'consumers' to address both reviewers and potential guests.

1.4   Thesis Structure

This thesis is presented in six chapters. Chapter 2 discusses the literature on social media in marketing and tourism, which is where the reviews and response are situated. Online consumer reviews and the company's response can be seen as a marketing communication initiative which could influence consumers' perceptions and contribute to their decision-making processes, especially in the information search phase. The literature review also explores the companies' response, which could be used as one part of their reputation management and service quality management.

This chapter continues with an exploration of the literature surrounding consumer behaviour which can be influenced by people's tendency to utilise reviews. Chapter 2 ends with a

review of the consumer decision-making process, with particular attention paid to information search processes, followed by a review of the theory in this field.

Chapter 3 considers the methodology used in this research and discusses the use of qualitative methodology by providing details about the data collection method, the semi-structured interview. The chapter continues by considering the sampling and participant recruitment process and the interview procedure, together with a section which examines ethical issues and ensuring the quality of the research. The final part of the chapter discusses the data analysis.

Chapter 4 explores the findings and analysis concerning online consumer reviews and companies' intervention. This chapter begins with an analysis of the benefits of online consumer reviews for consumers, followed by a section about their benefits for companies. It continues with an analysis of the negative side of reviews and readers' evaluation strategies. An analysis of the importance to companies of engaging in online review space is presented. Chapter 4 continues by discussing the impact of the companies' engagement, including a 'defensive response', a 'standard response', as well as a 'no response'. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the readers' awareness of companies' responses.

Chapter 5 explores the findings and analysis of the paradoxes caused by online consumer reviews and companies' interventions. It begins with an analysis of the three paradoxes caused by online consumer reviews observed in the study and ends with an analysis of the two paradoxes caused by companies' responses.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by presenting theoretical and practical contributions. This chapter ends with concluding remarks and reflections, considers potential limitations and suggests further areas for research.

Chapter 2.   Literature Review

2.1   Introduction

This study focuses on understanding the interaction of online consumer reviews and firms' interventions, as experienced by the reviewers, potential guests and hospitality firms, in the tourism and hospitality context. Consumer reviews are a manifestation of customers' engagement behaviour, posted on social media following their evaluation of their experiences. Acknowledging the fact that consumer reviews have a significant impact on consumers' behaviour, companies began to make interventions, responding to reviews. They do this to establish and maintain their online reputation, as well as to recover from any negative reviews. Consumer reviews and companies' responses, taken together, function as the company's marketing communication initiative which, in turn, acts as an input into more comprehensive consumers' information search process. Information gathered from reviews and companies' responses then shape consumers' expectations about the service, which eventually alters the gaps in the service quality model.

To situate this study theoretically, a critical examination of relevant literature has been undertaken identifying several key concepts: consumer behaviour and marketing communication. The chapter firstly starts by broadly presenting the concept of consumer behaviour. A detailed explanation regarding the consumer decision-making process is followed, with additional attention given to the information search process. Furthermore, various concepts in consumer behaviour relevant to the study such as customer engagement behaviour, motivations, self-concept and consumer satisfaction are discussed. Secondly, the literature about marketing communication is assessed. It covers the importance of electronic word-of-mouth in social media marketing which is manifested in online consumer reviews and firms' intervention as a reputation management initiative. Since e-WOM shapes consumer's expectations of service quality, the theory on this is also presented. Thirdly, the chapter focuses on the theoretical linkages between information processing theory and decision-making process. Finally, a summary is provided to highlight the importance of examining the interplay of the three actors.

2.2   Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour is defined as those "activities people undertake when obtaining, consuming and disposing of products and services" which is the key to a successful marketing program (Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2006, p. 4). Furthermore, Cohen, Prayag & Moital (2014) suggest that consumer behaviour related research in the tourism field

includes decision-making, values, motivations, self-concept and personality, expectations, attitudes, perceptions, satisfaction and trust and loyalty.

2.2.1 Consumer Decision-Making Process

Consumer decision making is an important topic within consumer research (Bettman, Luce and Payne, 1998) as well as in tourism research (Smallman and Moore, 2010). This topic is important because it shows marketers the road map on how consumers make purchase decisions (Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2006) which is significant for the success of tourism businesses (Hyde, 2008). Consumer decision-making process comprises of five main stages: (1) problem recognition, (2) information search, (3) alternative evaluation and selection, (4) outlet selection and purchase, and (5) post-purchase processes (Hawkins *et al.*, 1995 in Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005).

The five main stages inform the principles used by the three grand models of consumer behaviour proposed by Howard and Sheth (1969), Nicosia (1966) as well as Engel, Kollat & Blackwell (1968), which have been used as the basis for developing many tourism models (in Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). Further, some scholars argue that the three main theoretical approaches for modelling tourism decision making under this assumption are: the normative approach, the cognitive approach, and the choice sets approach (McCabe, Li and Chen, 2016, p. 4).

The normative approach assumes that decision-makers always consider the benefit and cost of each alternative before deciding while the cognitive approach assumes that consumers perform comprehensive cognitive processing before every purchase (McCabe, Li and Chen, 2016). Lastly, according to the choice set approach, consumers will only consider alternatives from their evoked set, which is derived from their awareness set (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). These three approaches have received some criticism because they assume that consumers are always rational and mostly see the decision-making process as an input-output process (Fishbein, 1967 in Litvin and MacLaurin, 2001) which pays more attention to the outcome stages, specifically in the choice set approach (Smallman and Moore, 2010). Hence, the conceptual understanding of tourist decision-making process is very limited because the mental processes behind it have been neglected (McCabe, Li and Chen, 2016).

Therefore, McCabe et al. (2016) suggest a new approach to tourist decision-making process based on the dual-system theory. In contrast with the sequential processing model which indicates that there is only one processing mode, and messages are analysed in sequence starting from problem recognition to purchase decision (Decrop, 2010), the dual-process

model assumes that two different processing modes independently occur and both processing modes affect attitude changes in different ways (Jun and Vogt, 2013, p. 195). Based on the dual system approach, "preferences are constructed (rather than innate) within the context of each new decision problem" (McCabe, Li and Chen, 2016, p. 7). This is mostly caused by an individual's limited processing capacity (Bettman, Luce and Payne, 1998). In conclusion, instead of always being in sequence, consumers might experience different decision-making processes; for some consumers, it could comprise a long process of information search and evaluation of alternatives, while for some others, it could be a quick impulsive decision (van Raaij, 1986). A further discussion about information processing theory is offered in section 2.4.

As mentioned before, several tourism scholars have proposed tourists decision-making process models or destination selection models (e.g., Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; McCabe *et al.*, 2016; van Raaij and Francken, 1984; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). Most of these scholars propose a sequential model (the models are available in Appendix K), except the application of the dual system theory by McCabe et al. (2016). Even though the latter model was based upon the interactive approach (e.g., the HSM), it suggests that the decision processing may *either* use system 1 (heuristic) *or* system 2 (systematic) based on the tourists' level of involvement. Tourists may use any one system when processing information, based on their differences, level of involvement and their relevance. However, tourists can change to system 1 in the middle of information processing because they cannot handle the cognitive load. This model is depicted in Figure 2-1.
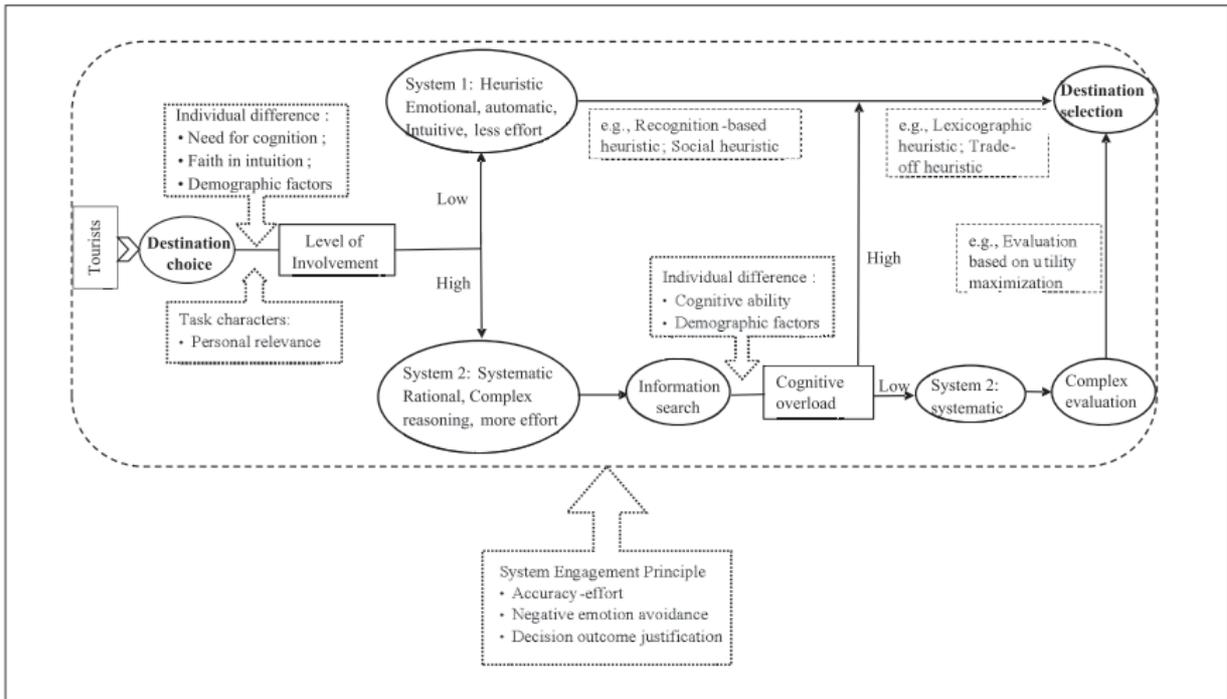
Figure 2-1 New General Model of Tourism Decision Making
(McCabe, Li and Chen, 2016, p. 9)

According to McCabe, Li & Chen (2016), even though the model focuses on 'destination choice', this could, in fact, be anything that needs to be decided by tourists. Tourists will either use system 1 or system 2 in every decision-making process, based on their level of involvement. Tourists' level of involvement is decided based on their need for cognition, faith in intuition and demographic factors as well as their relevance. Tourists with low involvement use system 1 while the opposite use system 2. In system 1, tourists largely depend on recognition and social heuristic, and could even finalise their decision without a search for external information and conducting an evaluation of the alternatives.

On the contrary, in a high involvement situation, tourists use system 2 and perform extensive information search. However, when a cognitive overload occurs, tourists might switch to system 1 and might engage in trade-off or lexicographic heuristic. Tourists may make decisions based on the most important attribute (trade-off heuristic), or they may rank information they have received in the previous step within different categories. When the most important category still has more than one remaining contender, then she/he will continue to the second most important category and so on (lexicographic heuristic). If the cognitive load is acceptable in system 2, tourists may keep processing the information and using the analytic system and perform complex evaluation among alternatives until the

decision is made (McCabe, Li and Chen, 2016, p. 10). Based on the above explanation, this model is deemed to be suitable to be applied to the current study.

2.2.2 Consumer Information Search

Consumers proceed into the information search stage after realisation of a need (Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2006). This stage is essential (Xiang, Choe and Fesenmaier, 2014) and nearly all consumer decision-making models have the information search as part of the process in their model (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004a). Importantly, marketers have a better chance of influencing consumers' purchase decisions during this stage (Gursoy, 2019). On the other hand, tourists conduct an information search to decrease their risk and enhance their trip quality (Fodness and Murray, 1997). Information search becomes even more critical because as Sheldon (1997) and Werthner & Klein (1999) suggest, tourism is an "information-intense industry", which means the accessibility of travel-related information is very important (in Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Therefore, information search has become a significant area within tourism research (Fodness and Murray, 1997; Standing, Tang-Taye and Boyer, 2014).

The information search is the second stage of the decision-making process; it represents the motivated activation of knowledge stored in memory or acquisition of information from the environment about potential need satisfiers (Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2006, p. 109). As the definition suggests, an information search can be either internal or external (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004b; Bing Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006; Hyde, 2008; Lee and Cranage, 2014). The former means retrieving information from one's knowledge and experiences, while the latter comes from commercial and market dominated sources (Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2006; Murphy, Chen and Cossutta, 2016).

Consumers, in general, will firstly search for information from their own experience and will look to the external environment when the content of their memory is not sufficient (Fodness and Murray, 1997; Gursoy and McCleary, 2004b). The effort required (i.e., evaluation, integration and retrieval of information) and the expected outcome are the factors influencing an internal search, while time spent and financial cost influence the external search (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004a). Further, consumers' experiences from previous trips (Jun, Vogt and Mackay, 2007), learning as well as prior product knowledge (Gursoy, 2019) which has two components: familiarity and expertise (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004a), are considered to be the internal factors that could influence tourists' information search.

Furthermore, Fodness & Murray proposed the leisure traveller information search model (

Table 2-1). According to the model, tourists can be segmented into four groups with three general patterns of information search: (1) routine information search, the one which is carried out quickly and with the use of a minimum of sources; (2) limited information search, which takes one of two forms: time-limited or source-limited. The user of a time-limited strategy conducts their search quickly, but with a higher than an average number of sources, while source-limited tourists use an above-average trip planning period along with fewer sources; and (3) extensive information search, which requires the most time and sources (1997).

Table 2-1 Leisure Traveller Information Search Model

Pre-trip Planning Period	Number of Sources Considered	
	Fewer	More
Shorter	Routine Search	Time-limited Search
Longer	Source-limited Search	Extended Search

(Fodness and Murray, 1997, p. 510)

Adapting Engel, Blackwell & Miniard's classification system (1995), Fodness & Murray (1997) suggested a classification of tourism (external) information sources as pictured in Table 2-2:

Table 2-2 Classification of Tourism Information Sources

Source of Information	Type of Information	
	Impersonal	Personal
Commercial	Brochures Guidebooks Local tourist offices State travel guides	Auto clubs Travel agents
Non-Commercial	Magazines Newspapers	Friends or relatives Highway welcome centres Personal experience

(Fodness and Murray, 1997, p. 506)

The classification is useful in that it portrays 11 different information sources that tourists use in their decision-making process, based on a comprehensive review in tourism literature. However, it has no mention of social media or any other user-generated content that has flourished since the development of the internet, and which has significantly changed

tourism information distribution and tourists' information search behaviour (Buhalis and Law, 2008). Social media, especially virtual communities and online consumer review websites, are now playing an increasingly important role as (external) information sources for travellers (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). To accommodate this development, the current study proposes that online consumer reviews, as one form of social media, should be considered in the impersonal and non-commercial source group, along with magazines and newspapers.

Furthermore, the internet has led many tourists to change their information search behaviour (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Xiang, Choe and Fesenmaier, 2014). Nowadays, most tourists use the internet to provide them with the necessary information. The internet has become the most important external source of information for travel planning and hotel booking (Jun, Vogt and Mackay, 2007; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). However, even though tourists may use the internet during the trip, it is specifically a better information source for detailed preparation before the trip (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006).

According to Pan and Fesenmaier (2006), travel information search on the internet is an interaction between information searchers and the information space (the part of the internet related to tourism and travel destinations) in the context of trip planning (in Xiang *et al.*, 2014). The internet makes it possible for the information searcher to find information about everything, in significant volume. This capability has led the information search to become easier and more convenient. However, since the information searcher has limited storage and processing capacity, this situation can cause confusion among consumers (Gursoy, 2019). Further, Walsh, Hennig-Thurau, & Mitchell (2007) suggest that confusion can become a problem for both consumers and marketers, which can have three forms: similarity, overload and ambiguity confusion.

Nonetheless, many tourism organisations have also become more dependent with the internet because it is seen as more reliable in tackling the increasing demand from consumers, along with the pressure for providing a better quality service more efficiently (Law, Buhalis and Cobanoglu, 2014). Along with the fact that consumers have become more reliant upon the internet as their information source, many hospitality companies have started to change their business practices and started using the internet as one of their primary marketing channels (Gursoy, 2019).

For internet search behaviour, more than half of tourists use a search engine initially (Fesenmaier *et al.*, 2011), as keyword searching is the most common starting point for an information search (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Some other scholars have also suggested that search engines, along with friends and family as well as online review sites, are the

most important external information sources (Gursoy, Del Chiappa and Zhang, 2017). Meanwhile, social media is among one of the most substantial parts of the search engine's results (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Figure 2-2 gives a more comprehensive view about social media and the keywords used by tourists in a search engine, which shows that specific keywords are more likely to generate a particular type of social media platform.
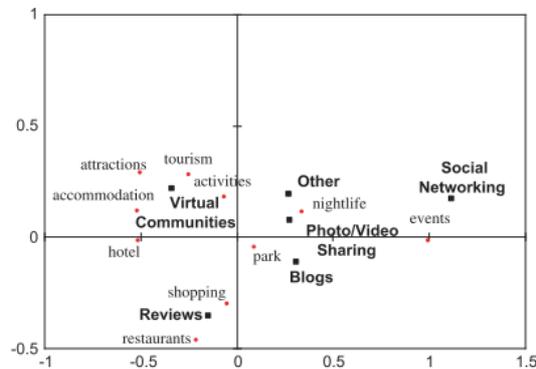
Figure 2-2 Correspondence between Keywords and Type of Social Media
(Xiang and Gretzel, 2010, p. 186)

For example, based on Figure 2-2, when tourists use 'hotel' as the keyword in the search engine, online consumer review websites are among the first on the list. More broadly, Fesenmaier, Xiang, Pan, & Law (2011), who also developed a framework of search engine used for travel planning, suggested a ranking of travel information sources as follow: general search engines (e.g.,, Yahoo, Google, and AOL), company sites (such as airlines, hotels, rental cars, and online travel agencies), online travel agencies (e.g., Expedia, Orbitz, and Travelocity), destination sites (such as those provided by the city or state), general travel sites that offer free brochures, travel search engines (e.g., Kayak or Sidestep), travel guidebook sites (e.g., Lonely Planet or Fodors), community sites (e.g., TripAdvisor and Virtual Tourist), newspaper/magazine sites, consumer content generated sites (e.g., YouTube and Flickr), and social networking sites (e.g., MySpace and Friendster). It is important to note that the search engines are not an information source, rather they act as a mediator which guide the tourists to the appropriate information source (the websites or the social media) (Murphy, Chen and Cossutta, 2016).

As has been noted in the previous paragraph, the internet has developed very rapidly. Since the research by Fesenmaier et al. (2011) discussed above, many new platforms have been introduced. Additionally, there is also an existing platform which has developed into providing a broader service. For example, not only providing a forum where the travel community can share information, but TripAdvisor has now also developed into a travel

search engine, providing hotel, restaurant, flights and car hire search. It also provides a package holiday and cruise search, as well as suggestions about things to do and rankings for all of the previously mentioned service providers.

Furthermore, as of June 2011, Friendster has repositioned itself as a gaming website and stopped being a social networking site (*Friendster*, no date) while Facebook, which was founded in 2003 as a social networking site for limited circles, has become the world's largest social media and social networking site (*Facebook*, no date) which offers various services and activities including those related to travel. Therefore, this thesis proposes that Facebook be included in the social networking category, while at the same time excluding Friendster from the same category. Additionally, Xiang et al., (2017) mention some examples of community-based sites such as LonelyPlanet, TripAdvisor and Yelp, which suggests the inclusion of LonelyPlanet and Yelp within that category.

Verma, Stock, & McCarthy (2012) state that tourists use different websites depending on their stage in the purchase process. Many tourists use search engines at the beginning of the process. Later on, to form their decision set, they are likely to visit brand websites, online travel agencies and travel bookers in addition to search engines with equal frequency. Once this process has been completed and tourists have already formed a list of potential options, they begin to utilise online consumer reviews. Finally, tourists finalise the process by making a booking via a travel brand website, or online travel agencies. Since online consumer reviews are one manifestation of customer engagement behaviour, the following section assesses the literature on this topic.

2.2.3 Customer Engagement Behaviour

In contrast with a rich body of literature on consumers' purchase behaviours, post-purchase activities are understudied (Verhagen *et al.*, 2015), especially in hospitality research (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013). Consumer reviews are the most common manifestation of consumer engagement behaviour in the hospitality industry (ibid, 2013). Consumer engagement behaviours (CEB) are the "consumers' behavioural manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers and include a vast array of behaviours including word-of-mouth (WOM) activity, recommendations, helping other consumers, blogging, writing reviews, and even engaging in legal action" (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010, p. 253). Tourism organisations can leverage CEB to attract and retain more consumers and gain additional insight into their business (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). More importantly, CEB in a company's social media activities has been proven to have a

positive effect on the company's reputation, especially among non-customers (Dijkmans, Kerkhof and Beukeboom, 2015).

Social media channels have made it easier for consumers to engage with the company in their own time, whenever and wherever they want (Stone and Woodcock, 2013). Social media has also made it easier for consumers to connect easily and conveniently (Verma, 2014), "to co-create unique brand experiences" (Kim and Drumwright, 2016, p. 974). Scholars have reflected upon this activity as positive and claimed to have found a relationship between customer engagement and brand performance (De Vries and Carlson, 2014) as well as financial performance (Stone and Woodcock, 2013). Further, customer engagement can also help achieve customer loyalty (Bowden, 2009; Thakur, 2018) and satisfaction (Gummerus *et al.*, 2012), even though its relationships are "fragmentary and depend on the research context" (Banyte and Dovaliene, 2014, p. 488). In contrast, satisfaction can induce customer engagement (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Brodie *et al.*, 2011), but a similar claim cannot be substantiated in the reverse direction (Dovaliene, Masiulyte and Piligrimiene, 2015). To offer a better understanding of CEB, its antecedents and its consequences, the following model (Figure 2-3) was proposed by So, King and Sparks (2014) based on their study and their adaptation from Hollebeek (2011) and van Doorn et al. (2010):
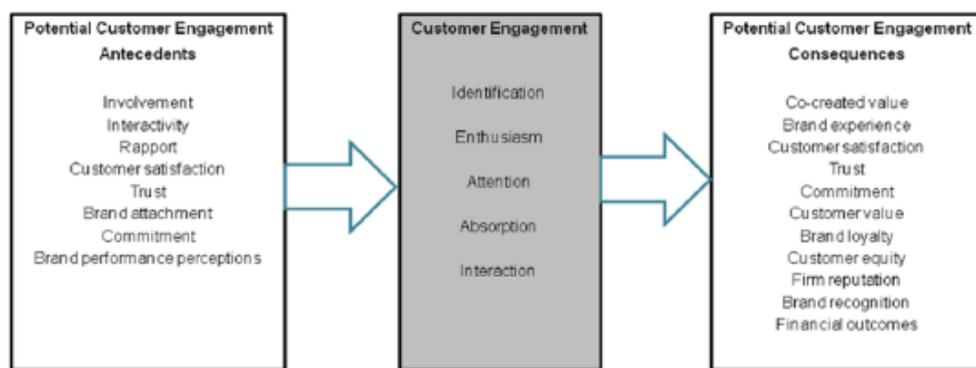
Figure 2-3 Conceptual Model of Customer Engagement
(So, King and Sparks, 2014, p. 312)

The central box outlines the main dimensions of CE. Enthusiasm represents an individual's intense level of excitement and interest regarding the focus of engagement. Attention represents an invisible material resource that a person can allocate in multiple ways; individuals who are highly engaged tend to focus a great deal of attention, consciously or unconsciously, on the object of engagement. Absorption represents effortless concentration, loss of self-consciousness, distortion of time, and intrinsic enjoyment. Interaction refers to a

customer's online and off-line participation with the brand or other customers outside of purchase. Finally, identification is an individual's "perceived oneness with or belongingness to an organization" (Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn, 1995, p. 46), and at the brand level, identification occurs when the consumer sees his or her self-image as overlapping the brand's image (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006)

Research has shown the benefits resulting from engagement through the creation of a consumer-friendly platform to facilitate dialogue and communication between consumers (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Kim and Drumwright, 2016). To do that, strategies include get-togethers, contests and sweepstakes (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010) and platforms such as online brand communities (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013; Hammedi *et al.*, 2015) or brand communities in social media such as Facebook (Gummerus *et al.*, 2012; Hashim and Fadhil, 2017) and company blogs (Verma, 2014). Success in these strategies is measured by interaction and involvement (Verma, 2014).

Furthermore, van Doorn *et al.* (2010) suggest five important aspects in CEB; valence, form or modality, scope, nature of its impact, and customer goals. First, CEB may be positive or negative (e.g., a customer might spread positive and negative WOM or e-WOM about the company). Second, the form and modality refer to the different ways a customer can express engagement behaviour depending on their resources (e.g., time or money). Third, engagement can be temporally momentary or ongoing, and it can also be local or global. Fourth, the nature of its impact is conceptualised as the immediacy, the intensity, breadth, and the longevity of the impact. Fifth, customers can have a different purpose when engaging with the company. One thing to note about the fifth dimension is that "if the customer's goals are aligned with the firm's goals, then CEB should have an overall positive impact on the firm; however, if the customer's and the firm's goals are misaligned, CEB may have more negative consequences" (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010, p. 256).

Therefore, it is evident that reviews written by tourists after they have consumed the service from tourism operators are a form of CEB (Park and Allen, 2013; Tian, 2013; Thakur, 2018). However, these are not only offered on a platform created by the company, as customers can also perform the engagement behaviour (i.e., writing reviews) within a forum which is directed towards a finite customer group within the public (e.g., TripAdvisor) (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). After identifying the venue where the engagement manifests, firms should evaluate CEB using the five dimensions and act on the behaviour. Positive suggestions and negative complaints should be given to and addressed by the relevant department in the company so that the company can improve their service quality as well as their performance (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). Having considered reviews as one manifestation of customer

engagement behaviour, it is also important to consider consumer motivations in writing and reading consumer reviews.

2.2.4 Motivations for Writing Reviews

According to Michael R. Solomon (2018, p. 173), motivation refers to the processes that lead people to behave as they do, as a consequence of a need that the consumer wishes to satisfy. This need occurs because there is an uncomfortable tension within the individuals' minds and bodies (Fodness, 1994). Therefore, it significantly determines consumer behaviour and is useful in explaining why consumers read online consumer reviews (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2003) or why they want to write one, and also important because it affects consumers' information search strategies and decisions (Zhang, Wu and Mattila, 2016).

Since this study investigates the presence of online consumer reviews and hospitality firms' responses, and how these affect tourists' behaviour, this discussion focuses on consumers' (i.e., reviewers) motivations for sharing their experiences on social media, as a form of their engagement with the service provider and actively participating in creating user-generated content. Meanwhile, the following section discusses consumers' (i.e., potential) motivations in reading the reviews as a form of their engagement with the company and in information search processes.

Research about consumers' motivations for writing a review could be traced back to study investigating word-of-mouth (WOM) motivation. People communicate differently under different conditions for different reasons. Some scholars concluded that for engaging in positive WOM, the following motivations apply; altruism (i.e., to help others to make a better decision), product involvement, self-enhancement, and helping the company. However, for the negative experience, the motivations for engaging in a negative WOM are altruism (i.e., to prevent others from having the same bad experience), anxiety reduction, vengeance and advice-seeking (Sundaram, Mitra and Webster, 1998).

A group of scholars has integrated WOM motivations with several other motives emerging from the characteristics of e-WOM (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Sundaram et al. (1998) is the most comprehensive study regarding WOM motivation which concluded that consumers might contribute to e-WOM because of social benefits, economic incentives, concern for others, and extraversion/self-enhancement. This study also suggested that e-WOM communicators (i.e., the reviewers) could be segmented into four groups based on their e-WOM motivations; self-interested hipsters, multiple-motives consumers, consumer advocates and altruists (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004).

Several tourism studies have found quite similar motivations (Yoo and Gretzel, 2008; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Yen and Tang, 2015). Additionally, further studies indicated that consumers' participation in an online travel community is motivated mainly by social and hedonic benefits as well as functional and psychological benefits (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004; Parra-López *et al.*, 2011). Specifically for motivation to write feedback on an online consumer review platform, which has a lower level of interactivity than any other kind of social media platform, seven motives are proposed; enjoyment or hedonic motivation, the exertion of collective power over companies, venting negative feelings, concerns for other consumers, helping the company, expressing positive feelings and self-enhancement (Yoo and Gretzel, 2008).

Some scholars have suggested dividing motivations into positive and negative e-WOM motivations and examined personality as the moderating role (Hu and Kim, 2018). This research adopted Sundaram et al.'s (1998) standpoint and suggested that the motivations for a positive electronic e-WOM are self-enhancement and enjoyment, altruism and economic incentives (e.g., writing e-WOM to receive some rewards such as points or discounts) while negative e-WOM include venting negative feeling, altruism, and financial incentives (negative).

Regarding the type of message and media chose in communicating e-WOM, some researchers have suggested that motivations also influence decisions (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011; Yen and Tang, 2015). In the case of online complaints, consumers' motivations (i.e., justice motivations, recovery, revenge, protection of others) are influenced by the type of schema (i.e., reparation, vigilante) consumers choose, which will also determine the choice of media and complaint behaviour (Gregoire, Salle and Tripp, 2015). In other words, the reasons why a consumer writes a review determines the media chose for the review and what kind of review is written (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011).

2.2.5 Motivations in Reading Reviews

Hennig-Thurau & Walsh in their seminal paper (2003) summarise eight motivations for reading electronic word-of-mouth distilled from the literature, including risk reduction, reduction of search time, determination of social position, dissonance reduction, belonging to a virtual community, to learn what products are new in the marketplace, remuneration, and to know how a product is to be consumed. However, their own analysis identified five further motives, comprising; obtaining buying related information, social orientation through information, community membership, remuneration and learning how to consume a product,

with two consequences; saving decision-making time and making better buying decisions (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2003).

Some argue that these do not capture all types of motives in the market. Specifically investigating consumers' motivation for reading online consumer reviews in the UK, one study argues that the five motives mentioned above were similar with their coded theme of decision involvement, product involvement, economic involvement, and social involvement. They further suggest the additional themes of self-involvement, consumer empowerment, and site involvement, which taken together encompass seven motivational orientations for the consumer to read online consumer reviews should be considered relevant (Burton and Khammash, 2010).

Additionally, there are three primary motivations for reading online consumer reviews: convenience and quality, risk reduction, and social reassurance. Some scholars furthermore suggest that this motivation will be different between consumers, primarily based on their gender and level of expertise (Kim, Mattila and Baloglu, 2011). For example, they stated that women read reviews because they want to reduce risks as well as for convenience and quality assurance. In contrast, men's usage of online reviews largely depends on their level of expertise. Moreover, personality also affects e-WOM motivations and e-WOM behaviour (Hu and Kim, 2018).

Regardless of their motivations, consumers are faced with an abundance of reviews on the internet. Since it is impossible to read all of them, consumers have to be able to choose wisely. The following section addresses the self-concept, which is considered to be an essential strategy used by consumers in their evaluation of messages in reviews.

2.2.6 Self-Concept Theory

According to Chan et al., "consumers do not assign equal value to the information provided by different individuals" (2017, p. 54). Instead, they often use reviewers' characteristics (e.g., personal identity information, expertise, and reputation) to assess the usefulness of reviews (Liu and Park, 2015). Research has shown that consumers rely more on reviews from reviewers with behavioural and demographic similarity (Yaniv, Choshen-Hillel and Milyavsky, 2011). This could be explained by the similarity-attraction paradigm from Byrne (1971), which states that consumers tend to be attracted to someone who looks similar or has had a similar experience (Ashforth and Mael (1989), cited in Kwok, Xie and Richards, 2017).

Across the literature concerning online consumer reviews, there are several terms used to describe the similarity concept. Some scholars use the concept of homophily (Brown,

Broderick and Lee, 2007; Bachleda and Berrada-Fathi, 2016) while some others prefer to use self-concept which was further elaborated as the self-image/product-image congruity concept, or mostly known as the self-congruity concept (Sirgy, 1982). This concept was also referred to as incidental similarity (Zhang, Wu and Mattila, 2016).

According to Rogers (1983), homophily is "the extent to which pairs of individuals are similar in terms of certain attributes, such as age, gender, education, or lifestyle" (in Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007, p. 5). While self-congruity is "a psychological process and outcome in which consumers compare their perception of a brand image (more specifically, brand personality or brand-user image) with their self-concept (e.g., actual self, ideal self, social self)" (Sirgy, 2018, p. 198). According to Burger et al. (2004), the incidental similarity is a peripheral factor used by an individual to adopt particular persuasive messages through the use of trivial similarities between the reader and the writer (Zhang, Wu and Mattila, 2016).

Self-congruity has been proven to offer predictive insight into consumers' attitudes towards a product and product purchase (Sirgy, 1982). Additionally, research has also confirmed that tourists evaluate a destination based on the person-like attribute (self-congruity) and also based on the destination's utilitarian or functional congruity (Sirgy and Su, 2000). Self-congruity is the matching process between a consumer's identity and the brand, or the user of the brand (Sirgy, 2018). It stems from self-concept theory, which, according to Rosenberg, means the "totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Sirgy, 1982, p. 287).

Furthermore, two motives, those of self-esteem and self-consistency, influence the self-concept. The self-esteem motive means that people will perform something which will enhance their self-concept, while the self-consistency motive implies that people will have the propensity to behave according to their view of themselves (Sirgy, 1982). If applied to explain consumer behaviour, the self-esteem motive suggests that the consumer would have the motivation to purchase products which have positive value to obtain a positive self-image. On the contrary, self-consistency means that a consumer will only purchase products which have an image congruent with their self-image belief (Sirgy, 1982). The self-concept theory, as well as self-congruity concept, have been used in various consumer behaviour studies, including in the tourism context.

The earliest tourism research using the self-concept theory was Chon (1992) (Litvin and Goh, 2002). This study and others that followed investigated self-congruity theory and destinations as brands in different settings (Chon, 1992; Sirgy and Su, 2000; Litvin and Goh,

2002; Beerli, Meneses and Gil, 2007; Boksberger *et al.*, 2011; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011; Ahn, Ekinci and Li, 2013; Pratt and Sparks, 2014). In a slightly different context from the articles mentioned above, Gration, Raciti, & Arcodia (2011) conducted a comparison between general travel motivation and festival motivation by utilising self-concept theory. Furthermore, Gazley & Watling (2015) incorporated self-concept, self-congruity, motivation and symbolic consumption, and concluded that tourists' perceptions were formed based on the similarity between their self and the product or experience.

Meanwhile, functional congruity is "the match between the utilitarian attributes of the destination and the tourist's ideal expectations related to those attributes" (Sirgy and Su, 2000, p. 340). In the context of blogs as communication media, functional congruity refers to the degree of similarity between the evaluation of bloggers' functional attributes and the readers' needs (Wang *et al.*, 2015). Even though both self-congruity and functional congruity influence consumers' travel behaviour (Sirgy and Su, 2000), functional congruity nevertheless exerts more influence over consumers' behaviour than self-congruity (Sirgy *et al.*, 1991; Ahn, Ekinci and Li, 2013). Functional congruity was found to be considered more by the consumer when booking accommodation, especially for a business stay (Su and Reynolds, 2017).

Nevertheless, it is concluded that self-congruity and functional congruity complement each other in influencing consumer behaviour (Sirgy *et al.*, 1991). Therefore, most studies have used both concepts together (Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak and Sirgy, 2012). Quality of service, price, aesthetics of the place and access by public transportation are some examples of functional attributes of a destination (Sirgy and Su, 2000). In an online context, both of these concepts have been used to explain the acceptance of online information in a blog concluding that a blogger's personal brand would be slightly similar with the readers' self-image (Wang *et al.*, 2015) while Brown, Broderick & Lee (2007) found that homophily was not applicable in an online context. As for incidental similarity, even though one study has proved that consumers were more likely to be influenced by reviewers who have similarity with them (Zhang, Wu and Mattila, 2016), the concept has not been used widely as congruity theory, which was duly adopted for this study.

Using the same concepts, the current study uses self-congruity and functional congruity to explain readers' behaviour in choosing from the abundance of online consumer reviews when conducting an information search process. By doing this, this thesis is the first study to adopt these concepts in an online consumer review context. The thesis suggests that tourists use self-congruity and functional congruity when selecting information from an abundance of consumer reviews. This strategy needs to be implemented so that they can

make optimal and efficient decisions. Thus, tourists' chance of a satisfactory outcome becomes greater. On the other hand, this study also assumes that consumer reviews are written by tourists who have evaluated their satisfaction, based on a comparison of their expectation and the actual performance of the service. The following section discusses consumer satisfaction in more detail, including its antecedents and outcomes.

2.2.7 Consumer Satisfaction: Its Antecedents and Outcomes

Even though consumer satisfaction is relevant within the hospitality marketing context, the conceptualisation of satisfaction remained undefined (Prayag, Hassibi and Nunkoo, 2018). The majority of studies in hospitality and tourism journals investigating consumer satisfaction and service quality did not specify source theories or did not rely on specific theories when generating a research hypothesis (Oh and Kim, 2017). Instead, this research frequently referenced other studies' empirical result without conducting conceptual discussion or reasoning.

However, definitions and explanations about satisfaction often caused confusion because of their similarity with the definition of service quality (Taylor and Baker, 1994; Baker and Crompton, 2000), as explained in section 2.3.2.2. This confusion is partly caused by the frequent use of the same theoretical source – the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm from Oliver (1980) for the conceptualisation of both constructs (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Cohen, Prayag and Moital, 2014; Oh and Kim, 2017). Additionally, confusion also arises because both concepts could be measured using the same set of attributes (Oh and Kim, 2017).

Nevertheless, marketing researchers have suggested that even though they share a very close relationship, consumer satisfaction and service quality are two different constructs (Taylor and Baker, 1994). Furthermore, several critical elements which differentiate the two concepts are as follows:

- Service quality is derived from specific dimensions, whereas satisfaction can result from any dimensions. Therefore, quality has fewer conceptual antecedents than satisfaction.
- Consumers do not have to have direct experience with the service providers to form their perception about quality, whereas experience is a prerequisite for satisfaction judgement.
- Consumers form their quality expectation based on what they thought as ideals, while satisfaction judgement could be formed from several non-quality issues such as needs, equity, and perception of fairness (Taylor and Baker, 1994).

According to Parasuraman and Berry (1985), "the two constructs can be distinguished by defining quality as a gestalt attitude toward a service which was acquired over a period of time after multiple experiences with it, whereas satisfaction was seen to relate to a specific service transaction" (in Baker and Crompton, 2000, p. 787). Further, the distinction between the two constructs in the field of tourism and recreational studies was first introduced by Brown in 1988: "Quality of performance, which may also be termed quality of opportunity, refers to the attributes of a service which are primarily controlled by a supplier. It is the output of a tourism provider. Evaluations of the quality of performance are based on tourists' perceptions of the performance of the provider. In contrast, satisfaction refers to an emotional state of mind after exposure to the opportunity" (in Baker and Crompton, 2000, p. 787).

However similar the two concepts are, from the above explanations, it is evident that consumers' perceptions and expectations play an important role in both constructs. The expectation is an individual's favourable beliefs about something which could affect perception about their experiences and will influence the individual's satisfaction and value creation (Rodríguez Del Bosque *et al.*, 2009). While according to Moutinho (1993), perception is "the process by which an individual selects, organises and interprets stimuli in a meaningful and coherent way" (Cohen, Prayag and Moital, 2014, p. 885). Furthermore, Moutinho also explains that social and personal factors influence the interpretation of the stimuli. Therefore, regarding the same stimuli, individuals might have a different perception as they have different social and personal characteristics.

Tourists often use social media as their information source to form some expectations about the destination (Narangajavana *et al.*, 2017). Specifically for consumer reviews, since they are written by real consumers who have stayed in that accommodation, about their own experience (Casaló *et al.*, 2015b; Geetha, Singha and Sinha, 2017), they provide potential consumers with a great deal of information about service quality. By reading the reviews, potential consumers gather more information about the accommodation and form expectations (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Filieri and McLeay, 2014).

As information written in consumer reviews consists of consumers' perceptions about the service quality, some scholars added that consumers' perceptions of this quality are more important than the actual quality itself (Bradley, Sparks and Weber, 2015). This is probably because reviews are the foundation of potential consumers' expectation of the service. Therefore, it is essential to manage tourists' expectations (Rodríguez Del Bosque *et al.*, 2009) so that their expectations closely resemble the actual service quality.

Because of that, hospitality firms have to become more active in monitoring and managing their image on social media, mostly since the internet has made sharing experiences among tourists very easy (O'Connor, 2010b). When hospitality firms have successfully managed their image to resemble actual service quality expected closely, tourists have more chance of becoming satisfied. This is important since satisfaction moderates the relationship between service quality and purchase intention (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Taylor and Baker, 1994; Baker and Crompton, 2000; Cohen, Prayag and Moital, 2014). Therefore, hospitality firms should treat consumer reviews on social media, as well as their responses to the reviews, as one of their marketing communication initiatives to obtain consumer satisfaction. The next section outlines this topic in more detail.

2.3   Marketing Communication

Wernerfelt (1994) stated that consumer reviews could be seen as a new element of the marketing communication mix which can help consumers to identify products that best match their needs (Chen and Xie, 2008). Marketing communication is how "firms attempt to inform, persuade, incite, and remind consumers - directly or indirectly - about the brands they sell" (Keller, 2001, p. 819). According to this definition, a company's intervention in the form of responses to online consumer reviews is also one form of marketing communication initiative. Based on this assumption, the second part of this chapter consists of a discussion about online consumer reviews and how it can form electronic-word-of-mouth in social media. The chapter continues by some discussion about firms' intervention and how it can be used as a tool for reputation management. Together, online consumer reviews and firms' intervention form consumer's expectation about service, which are taken into consumer's consideration while evaluating service quality.

Word of mouth communication is significant for service organisation because services are information-driven, and its characteristics force consumers to rely on others' opinions and evaluations prior to purchase or use (Haywood, 1989). Similarly for online consumer reviews, WOM is used intensively since the hospitality and tourism industry offers intangible and experiential products which have increased consumers' perceived risk and encouraged them to search for more information before making a purchase decision (Hu and Kim, 2018).

Furthermore, it is said that the most important capabilities of the interactive online media on the internet, concerning mass communication, is that it enables not only a company but also an individual or a consumer, to communicate and share their thoughts and opinions with the whole world, with such a low cost (Dellarocas, 2003) in two-way communication (Peters, 1998; Lagrosen, 2005). The next section provides more discussion about online consumer

reviews, which is one of the platforms that consumers use to communicate their opinions to the world.

2.3.1 Online Consumer Reviews

The online consumer review platform is a distinct category of social media (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010), which is designed for unidirectional communications from the poster to the reader (Schweidel and Moe, 2014). In contrast, others argue that the online feedback mechanism (i.e., online consumer reviews) is a word-of-mouth network which is only able to exist because of the bidirectional nature of the internet (Dellarocas, 2003). Regardless of this difference, most scholars agree that online consumer reviews consist of consumers' evaluations about a product or service after consumption (Schuckert, Liu and Law, 2015) and also a way "to place a complaint, express their feelings, comment on their satisfaction, and to rate a place, service, or hotel" (Schuckert, Liu and Law, 2015, p. 612). Therefore, consumer reviews have emerged as a powerful source of information beneficial for pre-purchase evaluation (Browning, So and Sparks, 2013), "substituting and complementing other forms of business-to-consumer and offline word-of-mouth communication about product quality" (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006, p. 345). Reviews can also be seen as a new type of word-of-mouth communication and play a significant role in consumers' purchase decision (Chen and Xie, 2008) because they can "provide additional product information to reduce uncertainty" (Fang *et al.*, 2016, p. 498).

The role of consumer reviews is so significant that some experts can make reliable forecasts of box office revenues by combining traditional techniques with online review metrics (Dellarocas, Zhang and Awad, 2007). This study suggests that online consumer reviews can be used to monitor consumers' behaviour in real-time and to adjust the company's marketing strategies. The role of reviews is so significant that according to one study, many online travel agents with platforms for online consumer reviews have given some incentives (e.g., badges and credits) to encourage high-quality reviews (Liu *et al.*, 2019) since this exercises some influence over purchasing intentions (Lee and Shin, 2014). Furthermore, some experts also see online consumer reviews as the most common manifestation of consumer engagement behaviour in the hospitality industry (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013) and as a form of social influence which has a strong effect on decision making (O'Connor, 2010b), even stronger than the price which previously was the dominant factor (Book *et al.*, 2018).

Online consumer reviews usually have two essential features to support consumer decision-making processes; opinions about a product or service and additional information about online retailers (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2003). Consumers' opinions about a product or

service can have two forms: an explanation about their experience and a rating for products or services (ibid). In other words, online consumer review contains review texts, a review title and a review score (Eslami and Ghasemaghaei, 2018). Furthermore, "online consumer reviews for hospitality products are mostly available on platforms such as TripAdvisor (e.g., hotel reviews), Yelp (e.g., restaurant reviews), Facebook (e.g., fan reviews for hotels and restaurants) and online travel agent (OTA) websites such as Expedia and Priceline (e.g., hotel reviews)" (Kwok, Xie and Richards, 2017, p. 309). Companies use these platforms to market their product while consumers use them to find information about some products or services.

Furthermore, online consumer reviews have a positive impact on consumer purchase behaviour (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Tsao, 2014; Mkono and Tribe, 2016) which eventually have an impact on a hotel's occupancy rates and performance (Ye, Law and Gu, 2009; Clare *et al.*, 2016; Viglia, Minazzi and Buhalis, 2016; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). However, there is still some debate among scholars about which review valence (positive or negative) has more impact on consumers. Some have suggested that positive reviews have a constructive effect on a company's performance, while negative reviews will have the opposite impact (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Phillips *et al.*, 2016; Chan *et al.*, 2017) such as damaging the hotel's reputation (Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012).

Even though negative reviews have more power in damaging consumers' perception of service quality than positive reviews in strengthening consumers' perceptios (Browning, So and Sparks, 2013), interestingly, negative reviews can increase sales (Berger, Sorensen and Rasmussen, 2010). These scholars suggest that negative publicity can increase awareness which then leads to the likelihood of purchase. Further, the influence of negative reviews on the purchase decision is stronger than that of the positive reviews (Tsao, 2014), probably because some consumers found them to be more helpful (Eslami, Ghasemaghaei and Hassanein, 2018) and give more weight to a negative review (Lee and Cranage, 2014; Book *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, the presence of a positive review among a number of negative reviews can have a favourable impact on consumers' decisions while the presence of a negative review in the middle of numerous positive reviews may not have the same effect in changing consumers' decisions (Book *et al.*, 2018). However, a few negative messages can promote online review platform as being credible because consumers' suspicions may be aroused when they see no negative reviews on the website (Doh and Hwang, 2009; Larson and Denton, 2014). In conclusion, even though there are many different results regarding review valence,

essentially, studies converge on an agreement that review valence has a significant influence on sales (Marchand, Hennig-Thurau and Wiertz, 2017).

Moving on to the anonymity factor in online reviews, it puts the reader in a vulnerable position (Dellarocas, 2006). On the one hand, consumers may prefer information from user-generated-content such as online consumer reviews (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013) because it is perceived as more trustworthy than advertising (Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay, 2015) and thus has gained increasing popularity among tourists for quality assurance (Jeacle and Carter, 2011). On the other hand, specifically regarding negative reviews, there are some suspicions that some of them may be an exaggeration and even a fabrication from consumers (Bradley, Sparks and Weber, 2015) who experienced dissatisfaction.

This is especially important since there is quite some evidence about fake (Keates, 2007; Larson and Denton, 2014; Luca and Zervas, 2016) and paid online reviews (Dellarocas, 2006; Ayeh, Au and Law, 2016) which could be seen as a strategic manipulation (Dellarocas, 2006; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). Additionally, another study has confirmed that because of its role in shaping online reputation, some managers have been tempted to manipulate online consumer reviews for their benefit (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018), mostly when their reputation was weak (Luca and Zervas, 2016). These conditions have led credibility (Casaló *et al.*, 2015b) and trustworthiness (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013; Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay, 2015) to become important issues in online settings (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2016).

Moreover, consumers' perceptions about credibility and trust are formed by the review's valence, information content and presentation, as well as source credibility (Sparks and Browning, 2011). Xu (2014) then suggests relying on reviewers' personal information on their profile to gain confidence in their credibility. While according to Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007, p. 6), a source is considered to be credible when they have "greater expertise and less prone to bias". Furthermore, they explained that source bias could also be conceptualised as source trustworthiness.

Another important thing to note is information overload. Advances in information technologies have made it easier for consumers to share their experiences about almost everything on the internet (Dellarocas, 2006). However, this has caused information overload which is a challenge for consumers and businesses and has made review helpfulness as an important topic of study for many scholars (Martin and Pu, 2014; Fang *et al.*, 2016; Singh *et al.*, 2017; Park, 2018). To overcome information overload, scholars have

suggested that only helpful reviews should be presented to consumers (Martin and Pu, 2014; Park, 2018).

A helpful review is the one that is easy to read, concise, meaningful and contains explicit opinion and evaluation about the product (Singh *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, text readability and reviewer characteristics were suggested by Fang et al. (2016) as factors which affect the perceived value of reviews, while emotions also contribute to the helpfulness of a review because they can trigger reactions (Martin and Pu, 2014).

Furthermore, it is important to be aware of reporting bias, in which reviewers may selectively choose to write one type of review and not another (Dellarocas and Wood, 2008). Reporting bias could be harmful because it can distort the real quality of a product or service and can diminish online reviews' usefulness (ibid). This is probably why a few negative messages could promote one platform's credibility because it can eliminate the probability of reporting bias on the website (Doh and Hwang, 2009).

Online consumer review platforms can help readers gain full benefit from reviews by giving assurance to readers about reliability and validity (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). One interesting yet important finding is that review credibility has some potential reciprocal relationship with review helpfulness (Clare *et al.*, 2016). For example, even though the reader deemed a review as credible, it was still unhelpful if the reader did not need the information. Vice versa, even when the information from the review was relevant, it was still insignificant if it was deemed as not credible.

Within the numerous studies regarding online consumer reviews, marketers' perspectives about the phenomenon, as well as their responses to it, remain understudied (Xie, Kwok and Wang, 2017). Since marketers are also key players in this communication process, this thesis integrates the perspective of marketers along with the other key players on the relationship: reviewers and potential consumers (i.e., tourists, consumers) to provide a more thorough understanding of this topic.

From a few studies utilising the marketer's perspective, it is known that firms and marketers can gain several benefits from monitoring the reviews (O'Connor, 2010b). The benefits include gaining useful information about potential improvement and development of their service (Zhang *et al.*, 2010; Ye *et al.*, 2011; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018; Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019) and the ability to identify and solve customer problems (Park and Allen, 2013) or conduct service recovery (Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012).

Monitoring online consumer reviews can also provide firms with information about their competitors' performance (Gao *et al.*, 2018) and enable them to conduct market research (Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012), primarily to assess consumers' demand (Schuckert, Liu and Law, 2015) which then leads to the ability of the company to create a better strategy. Additionally, information from consumer reviews can also be used to evaluate employees' performance (Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012). Because of these benefits, many companies are monitoring online consumer reviews platforms (e.g., TripAdvisor) as part of their daily business activities (Baka, 2016). Based on this monitoring process, companies have decided to make some interventions and provide a response to the reviews, even though not all of them respond publicly (Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012).

From this discussion, we can conclude that online consumer reviews are a manifestation of consumers' engagement behaviour, which contribute to electronic-word-of-mouth and primarily happen in an online environment specifically on social media. These two topics are available in the following two sections.

2.3.1.1 Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communication

Online consumer review is a form of word-of-mouth information (Dellarocas, Zhang and Awad, 2007; Chen and Xie, 2008; Lee, Park and Han, 2008; Tian, 2013) which occurs on the internet (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Bachleda and Berrada-Fathi, 2016); therefore it is called electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). It is usually in written form, occurs between people who know each other or between strangers, and unlike the traditional WOM, e-WOM conversations can be easily accessible and kept in a public record (Dellarocas, 2003; Park and Lee, 2009). The written form has also enabled consumers to "easily observe and measure the quantity and quality of positive and negative opinion" (Lee, Park and Han, 2008, p. 341). Because of these characteristics, e-WOM can have a more significant influence over a higher number of consumers (Yoo and Gretzel, 2008). As a matter of fact, "e-WOM has become the most influential sources of information on the web" (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016, p. 192) for product evaluation before a purchase (Lee, Park and Han, 2008; Doh and Hwang, 2009).

Similarly, Bronner & de Hoog (2011) claim that e-WOM is the kind of information which consumers read and use during their choice process, as well as post [after the consumption]. According to Litvin et al. (2008, p. 461), e-WOM is "all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers". As stated in the definition, e-WOM can spread via many types of internet-based electronic media, which

have different characteristics. These scholars then offer a typology of the various e-WOM channels, based on the communication's scope and level of interactivity, as pictured in Figure 2-4. It is important to note that "there is a relative ranking of importance among e-WOM sources, with review site testimonials found to be more influential than either Facebook or corporate website testimonials" (Bachleda and Berrada-Fathi, 2016, p. 109).
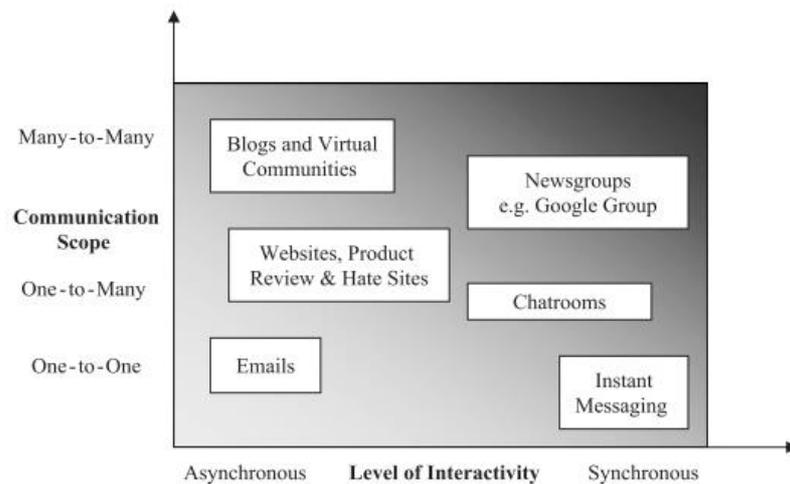
Figure 2-4 A typology of electronic word-of-mouth channels
(Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008, p. 462)

Similar to the characteristics of social media, which guarantees the anonymity of the participant, as well as the low cost of access and information exchange, added to the capability for greater control over format and communication types within a broader scope (Dellarocas, 2003), e-WOM has generated many "new possibilities and challenges for marketers" (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008, p. 462). These characteristics of e-WOM have led consumers to neglect traditional opinion leaders, and seek information via e-WOM instead (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004).

The same situation also takes place in the hospitality and tourism industry. Many consumers have abandoned offline travel agents and started purchasing travel products from new types of travel intermediaries such as Expedia, Booking.com and the like (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008). However, travel marketers have to be aware that since these electronic agents have failed to offer reassurance and guidance, they do not have power as opinion leaders. Many consumers now look at online consumer review websites as their foremost opinion leaders to compensate for the lack of interpersonal relationship from the electronic agents (ibid). The use of online consumer reviews has become more intense, especially since the hospitality and tourism industry offers intangible and experiential products which have increased consumers' perceived risk and encouraged them to search for more information before making a purchase decision (Hu and Kim, 2018).

Finally, "e-WOM effect is greater for negative e-WOM than for positive e-WOM, greater for established websites than for unestablished websites, and greater for experience goods than for search goods" (C. Park and Lee, 2009, p. 61). Further, other scholars add some fascinating insight that a few negative messages are indeed helpful in establishing the credibility of e-WOM messages and its websites and in fact, the website's credibility could be damaged if it only contains positive messages (Doh and Hwang, 2009). Moreover, other research has concluded that negative offline WOM is more potent than negative e-WOM (Bachleda and Berrada-Fathi, 2016).

2.3.1.2 Social Media in Marketing and Tourism

Marketers have used social media as a component in their marketing strategies and campaigns to reach out to consumers (Akar and Topcu, 2011). It offers one of the best opportunities available to a brand for connecting with prospective consumers and winning their trust by connecting with them on a more profound level (Neti, 2011). Social media marketing, also known as word-of-mouth marketing, viral marketing, buzz, and gorilla marketing is the intentional influencing of consumer-to-consumer communications by professional marketing techniques (Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2011). It can convert consumers into marketers and advertisers, which can create positive or negative pressure for the company, its products, and its services (Akar and Topcu, 2011).

Social Media refers to "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). It allows companies to interact directly with consumers via various internet platforms and to monitor and interact with consumer opinions and evaluations of services (Hvass and Munar, 2012, p. 93). Since consumers' participation in social media, and therefore, their exposure to brands, is voluntary, the effectiveness of social media marketing is enhanced (Kim and Drumwright, 2016). Consumers make their own decision when they see messages or brand information on social media, whether or not they want to join and receive information from the marketer, and whether or not they press the like or share button.

Study of the internet in the tourism industry emerged in the late 1990s. This early research studied how information technology stimulated revolutionary changes in the operation and distribution of the tourism industry and changed the way prospective tourists browse for information to identify a variety of offers on the internet (Buhalis, 1998). Later, Gretzel et al. noted that the different applications on the internet had provided travellers with "unparalleled access to choices, opportunities for comparison shopping and control over of the many

processes related to the consumption of tourism experiences" (2006, p. 15). This could happen because the internet has also become the place where tourists can share the electronic word of mouth or e-WOM (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008).

Law (2006) was among the first to investigate social media, and TripAdvisor specifically, as a website aimed at providing unbiased recommendations for hotels and other travel-related information to users. After that, many other studies have examined social media. One particular study gave recommendations and suggestions for dealing with the opportunities and challenges of social media (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Most studies are interested in the social media's effects on tourists' behaviour and how it changes their decision-making process, especially their information search behaviour (e.g., Gursoy and McCleary, 2004a; B Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006; Buhalis and Law, 2008; Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Parra-López *et al.*, 2011; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). Only a few studies investigated the reviewer's perspective (e.g., Tripp and Grégoire, 2011; Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015) and even fewer studies on the marketer's side, examining how the company can use social media to leverage its competitiveness (e.g., Dellarocas, 2006; Hays, Page and Buhalis, 2013; Cabiddu, Carlo and Piccoli, 2014).

Social media enable communications at a larger scale and faster speed than previous communication media (Hays, Page and Buhalis, 2013) and also "provide users with capabilities that they do not possess in traditional social networks" (Kane, Labianca and Borgatti, 2014, p. 290), such as exchanging information with other users worldwide and influence each other in so doing. As a result of social media, consumers are becoming more powerful and sophisticated, "difficult to influence, persuade and retain" (Constantinides, 2014, p. 40). It is therefore becoming a vital information source to potential tourists and is seen as more trustworthy than information provided by the destination or tourism service provider; this can subsequently be considered a substitute for word of mouth (Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides, 2012).

Social media venues have different structural formats which can affect consumers' social media posting behaviours. Schweidel and Moe (2014) explain that, for example, some outlets such as Twitter and other online consumer review platforms, limit the number of characters in a post while blogs and discussion forums have more flexibility than the channels mentioned above. Therefore, people tend to post extreme opinions to convey their views in a highly limited space while on the other media, they have more freedom to express their views. Furthermore, they argue that these channels have a different degree of interaction. For example, a social network website such as Facebook is designed to facilitate

social interaction. However, online consumer review websites such as TripAdvisor or Booking.com are designed for one-directional communication.

In the context of the tourism industry, travellers share their travel experiences on social media platforms and search for independent and credible travel information to plan their travel (Kang and Schuett, 2013; Liu and Park, 2015). More than one-third of online tourists are influenced to some extent by social media while TripAdvisor-branded sites comprise the largest travel community in the world (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides, 2012; Cabiddu, Carlo and Piccoli, 2014). It is the most used site by tourists for information searching (Miguéns, Baggio and Costa, 2008; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Thus, social media holds strategic importance for tourism competitiveness (Leung *et al.*, 2013).

From the above discussion, it is clear that social media is a key channel of communication between marketers and consumers. Consumers may perform various behaviours within social media. However, regardless of type, the importance of social media and its effects on the consumer, have led firms and marketers to participate in social media to influence consumer perceptions (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008; Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015). Through these interventions, companies seek to stem negative sentiments and improve consumer relationships. More discussion about firms' intervention is presented in the next section.

2.3.2 Firms' Interventions

As have been noted earlier, firms and marketers have recognised the importance of social media and its effects on the consumer and have participated in social media to influence customer perceptions, and have been moving from "passive listening to active service intervention" (Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015, p. 627). Even though there are several studies in this field (e.g., O'Connor, 2010; Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012; Schuckert, Liu and Law, 2015; Xie, So and Wang, 2017; Grégoire *et al.*, 2018), this topic remains nevertheless understudied (Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Xie, Kwok and Wang, 2017), with only a few studies investigating the effect of the intervention, which is also known as the firm's response to customers' engagement behaviour (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013) or a new form of customer relationship management (Xie, Zhang and Zhang, 2014).

Many firms have been actively makinginterventions in online consumer reviews, with many of them starting to respond after receiving a negative shock to their ratings (Proserpio and Zervas, 2017). Additionally, some studies argue that firms seem to respond to every review valence (i.e., positive, negative and neutral) at approximately the same rate (ibid). In contrast, others have found that many managers give priority to responding to and invest

more effort in, reviews which are easy to digest, negative and long (Liu and Law, 2018). Meanwhile, some companies which do not respond to any reviews have been found to monitor and react to the reviews, especially to the complaints (Park and Allen, 2013).

Regardless of the type of response, firms should proactively engage with customers on social media, rather than just reacting to complaints and service intervention (Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015). Moreover, such service intervention could have two opposite effects: it could improve a firm's relationship with the customer, but also encourage even more complaints in the future (ibid). Management of response could also reduce the effect of unfavourable reviews and enhance the impact of favourable ones on hotel performance (Xie, Zhang and Zhang, 2014; Xie, Kwok and Wang, 2017), while another study added that organisations with the ability to implement an effective response management strategy would have a competitive advantage among their rivals (Lui *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, management's response also affects online reputation, customer satisfaction and consumer revisits (Liu and Law, 2018). By responding to the reviews, managers can also turn dissatisfaction into loyalty (Pantelidis, 2010).

On the contrary, even though consumer reviews can be seen as an informative source for improving services and securing competitive advantage (Zhang *et al.*, 2010; Ye *et al.*, 2011), "the presence of hotel managers' responses to guests' reviews can have a negative impact on purchasing intentions" (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013, p. 99). The negative effects could be caused by the fact that the reviewer on an online review site is not on the premises waiting for a response (Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015) and may not expect any direct online response (Sparks and Bradley, 2014). In addition, the response on a website like TripAdvisor could disturb the interaction among customers and therefore, could negatively influence their perceptions (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013).

Regarding that fact, marketers have to be careful in deciding whether or not they should intervene. According to Hovland, Janis and Kelly (1953) "when a person is perceived as having a definite intention to persuade others, the likelihood is increased that he will be perceived as having something to gain and hence, as less worthy of trust" (in Mills and Aronson, 1965, p. 173). This statement suggests that the reviewers and other tourists who read reviews may perceive the company which posts a reply as being less trustworthy. Therefore, several studies have been conducted to identify effective ways for managers to respond to online reviews (Kwok, Xie and Richards, 2017).

Firms should invest more resources in monitoring online reviews while responding proactively to those reviews (Lui *et al.*, 2018) in a timely manner (van Noort and Willemsen,

2011; Xie, So and Wang, 2017) with lengthy (Xie, So and Wang, 2017) unstandardized messages that reflect an emphatic response from the company (Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015). Min, Lim and Manigni further argue that an emphatic response with paraphrased statement demonstrated careful listening and influenced potential customers' satisfaction. Meanwhile, Xie, So and Wang (2017) claim that providing a standard message could negatively affect future financial performance.

Responding to negative reviews is especially complicated and has encouraged some researchers to develop a formulation for the best response, including appreciation, apologies and explanations (Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012). A more recent study developed a more comprehensive formula consisting of a classification or a typology, which firms can draw on to form a response to negative reviews. The typology is called the "Triple-A" which, as the name suggests, consists of Acknowledgement, Accounts and Actions (Sparks and Bradley, 2014) as follow:

Figure 2-5 "Triple-A" Typology of Responding
(Sparks and Bradley, 2014, p. 5)

Acknowledgement refers to management's statements which show their recognition, acceptance and confirmation towards the reviews. The next part of the response is an account, which means an explanation, and it can take many forms such as excuse, justify, reframe, penitential and denial. Finally, firms must describe some action in their response which refers to specific initiatives that the management have undertaken, are going to take, or are being considered to address the review (Sparks and Bradley, 2014). In conclusion, firms' intervention is a marketing communication initiative which contributes to the firms' reputation. Other than that, it can also help the company in its service quality management. The next sub-sections address these two topics in more detail.

2.3.2.1 Reputation Management

A company's reputation is an intangible asset, which is very valuable but becomes more challenging to manage due to the emergence of online consumer reviews (Dijkmans,

Kerkhof and Beukeboom, 2015). Online reviews can shape a company's online reputation through two of its most important contents: consumers' contributions and the company's response (Baka, 2016). The latter is deemed as more important in reputation management (Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019).

The literature suggests that responding to a review can maintain or improve a company's online reputation as well as its ratings (Park and Allen, 2013; Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Liu and Law, 2018). By continually responding, consumers, as well as reviewers, will have the perception that the company is reading their reviews and that they will get a response for their own (Proserpio and Zervas, 2017). Therefore, consumers will be less likely to write a low-quality negative review since they know that it will be analysed in detail; hence, they are more likely to write a positive review because they know that the firms will read their review and appreciate it (ibid). Hence, the rating, as well as the reputation, improve.

Further, managing an online reputation is an ongoing cyclical process comprising several moments, which consists of: recognising the landscape for reputation, continuously evaluating fluctuations in ratings and rankings while learning about the publication scope, making a comparison with competitors, learning about ranking methodologies and improving reputational score (Baka, 2016). This study further underlines the importance of firms' responses towards the formation of their reputation: a negative review could potentially produce a positive image when it is responded to well, and vice versa, the positive review could have no effect when the company does not offer any response to it.
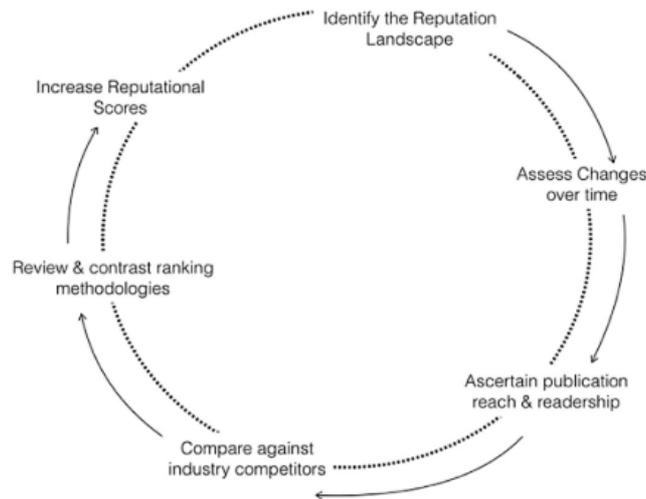
Figure 2-6 Conceptual Model of Online Reputation Management
(Baka, 2016, p. 160)

Following the model proposed by Baka (2016) above, one study has found that online reputation management contributes significantly to financial benefits, customer relationship benefits and customer-based brand benefits (Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019). Further, to actively manage their online reputation, hospitality firms should learn about aspects that were commented upon in reviews, and where the reviews took place. Some hospitality firms use free tools for their monitoring or subscribe to advanced software (e.g., ReviewPro, ReviewTracker, KePSLA), so they can respond quickly as well as get a comprehensive report about the reviews and their key performance indicators (e.g., occupation and conversation rate) (ibid).

These softwares can also be used as a tool for competitor analysis in which they could compare their strengths and weaknesses for further improvement strategies. Firms have begun to learn about how particular review platforms define their rating and ranking systems, which enables them to define strategies to improve their reputation. As explained by Proserpio and Zervas (2017) above, the response towards reviews plays an essential role in enhancing rating and reputation. Other than that, hotels can also use negative review feedback as part of corrective mechanisms for service improvement and development (Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019).

However, managers have to be aware that not every reputational threat should be responded to, and that in some cases (e.g., online parody), a response would eventually cause more damage than ignoring the issue (Veil, Petrun and Roberts, 2012). This result is parallel with the point made in the last section, namely that a response could have a negative impact (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013) because consumers do not expect a response

(Sparks and Bradley, 2014; Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015) and would see it as a disturbance towards their interaction with other consumers (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). Managers need to be mindful about this when they are trying to respond to online reviews because inappropriately responding to an issue would create an expectation gap which could quickly spread online by negative publicity (Veil, Petrun and Roberts, 2012). This is just one of such gaps in the service quality model (A Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985) which can be managed by the company, to create customer satisfaction. The following section examines service quality management in more detail.

2.3.2.2 Service Quality Management

Quality is an elusive and indistinct construct (A Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985). It becomes more challenging to describe the quality of service because both constructs are intangible. The first study to introduce a service-oriented approach to quality was Grönroos in 1982 (Grönroos, 1988). He developed a model of service quality to describe how consumers evaluated and perceived the quality of service and argued that the quality of service is a result of a comparison between the expected service and the perceived service (Grönroos, 1984).

Consumers form expectations by taking into account promises from the company (e.g., advertising, selling and pricing), the consumers' tradition and ideology, word of mouth communication and previous experience. The perceived service is the result of the service delivered by the company, concerns not only about the technical dimension (what consumer gets) but also about its functional dimension (how the consumer receives it – related to buyer-seller interactions). The additional concern about the functional dimension is probably the main difference with the quality appraisal of goods since there is no interaction in the production process with services. Grönroos then added the corporate image as another factor which can influence the service quality. Corporate image is how consumers perceive the firm, built up mainly by the technical quality and functional quality. According to his study, the corporate image can influence a consumer's evaluation of perceived service, which can affect the consumer's perceived service quality assessment (Grönroos, 1984). The model is depicted in Figure 2-7 .
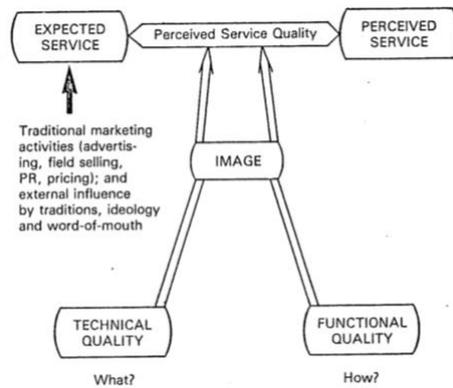
Figure 2-7 Grönroos' Service Quality Model
(Grönroos, 1984, p. 40)

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) also developed a model of service showing how consumers assess quality. The model states that service quality is an assessment between expected and perceived service. Expected service is formed from a consumer's personal needs, word of mouth communication, past experience and the company's external communication to consumers. Substantively, both studies produced a service quality model with almost similar concepts. However, Parasuraman et al. are more organised and holistic, especially when one wants to see a complete view and trace the various activities within the company which contribute to consumers' perceived service. The model explains numerous possible gaps which can occur during service delivery. The company can manage the service quality by narrowing the gap between each activity (shown in Figure 2-8).
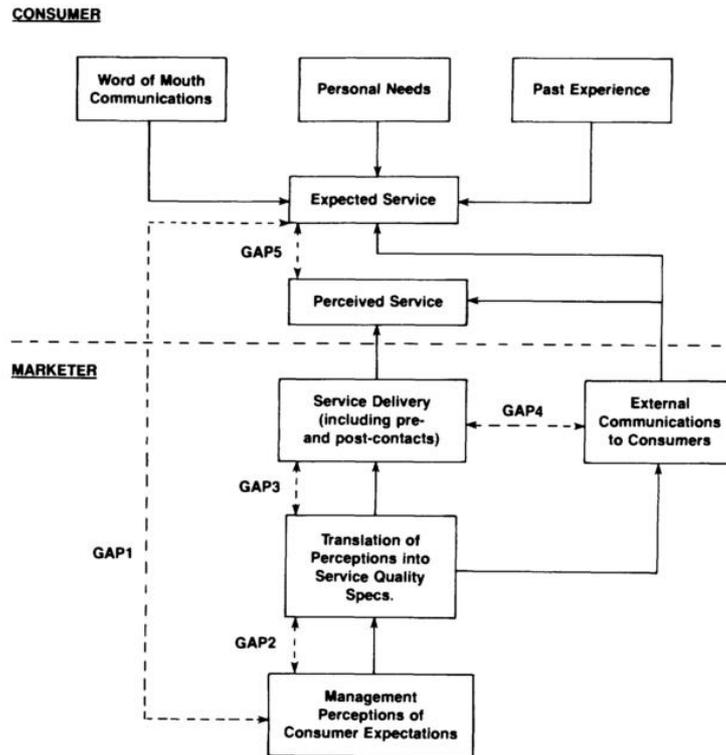
Figure 2-8 Service Quality Model

(A Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985, p. 44)

According to the model, there are five possible gaps within a service delivery (A. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985); Gap 1 exists because there are discrepancies between consumer expectation and management perception. These discrepancies can happen because service marketers may not always understand what consumers need and want specifically from a service. Gap 2 occurs because the management cannot provide a service specification that matches with their perception of consumer expectation. This discrepancy may happen because of resource constraints, market condition and management indifference. Even when a firm can adopt guidelines which adhere to consumer expectations, Gap 3 may still occur because there is a discrepancy between the service quality specifications and the service delivery. The main reason for this discrepancy is because of the variability in employee performance.

Furthermore, Gap 4 may occur because of discrepancies between service delivery and external communication. This gap can be minimised by avoiding giving unrealistic promises and providing information about service delivery aspects intended to serve consumers well. All of these activities will contribute to the consumer's perceived service. Finally, Gap 5 emerges after the consumer compares their expectation and the actual service performance. Gap 5 is what some experts call service quality (Grönroos, 1984; A. Parasuraman, Zeithaml

and Berry, 1985). Perceived service quality is, therefore viewed as "the degree and direction of the discrepancy between consumers' perceptions and expectations" (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988, p. 17). These researchers stress the differences in the term "expectation" in the service quality and consumer satisfaction literature. In the satisfaction literature, expectations are viewed as *predictions* about what is likely to happen during a transaction or exchange. While in the service quality literature, "expectations are viewed as desires or want of consumers, i.e., what they feel a service provider *should* offer rather than *would* offer" (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988, p. 17).

The total perceived service quality level is not only determined by the level of technical and functional quality dimensions, but rather by the gap between the expected and experienced quality (Grönroos, 1988), between the experienced quality and the quality communicated by the marketer, corporate image and customer's needs. Because customer's needs are something which is independent and cannot be managed or controlled by the company, companies can manage their service quality through the management of external communication and corporate image, among other things.

This thesis is particularly interested in investigating Gap 1, Gap 4 and Gap 5 while assuming that online consumer reviews can minimise Gap 1 and consequently, together with the response from marketers, can minimise Gap 4 and Gap 5. This assumption is based on the fact that online consumer reviews have been used as a convenient platform "to place a complaint, express their feelings, comment on their satisfaction, and to rate a place, service, or hotel" (Schuckert, Liu and Law, 2015, p. 612) so that it can be used as an information source about consumer's behaviour (Dellarocas, Zhang and Awad, 2007). By doing so, marketers become more informed about consumer's expectation, and Gap 1 can be minimised. Furthermore, online consumer reviews have become a reliable source of information before tourists make a purchase (Browning, So and Sparks, 2013). Information from reviewers and replies from hospitality firms can consequently shape the expectation of prospective tourists who read the review. Therefore, together, they can potentially minimise Gap 4 and Gap 5 within the service quality model.

This discussion about service quality and how consumer satisfaction can be obtained by monitoring online consumer reviews and providing a response as firms' marketing communication initiative, conclude the presentation of key concepts used in the study. The next section examines the theoretical linkages between information processing theory and decision-making process.

2.4   Information-Processing Theory

The information-processing theory is central to all consumer behaviour models (Bettman et al., 1998; Gabbott & Hogg, 1994) in (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). According to Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard (1995), information processing refers to the process by which an individual receives stimuli (i.e., exposure), allocates processing capacity to the incoming stimuli (i.e., attention), interprets stimuli (i.e., comprehension), accepts or rejects certain stimuli (i.e., acceptance), and transfers accepted stimuli and stores in memory for future retrieval (i.e., retention) (in Jun and Vogt, 2013, p. 193). Information processing theory explains consumer behaviour in terms of cognitive operations and could give an understanding of the psychological processes behind consumer behaviour (Tybout, Calder and Sternthal, 1981). Scholars have used it to further explain travellers' decision-making processes (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005; Jun and Vogt, 2013).

Bettman (1979) explains that individuals have a set of sensory stores comprising a short-term memory store (STS) and a long-term memory store (LTS), which is also known as the multiple-store approach (see Atkinson and Shiffrin 1968). Furthermore, all information received by an individual's senses, if processed, will be stored in the STS. Active information in STS can be recalled almost automatically. However, to continuously become active information in STS, further processing is needed. Moreover, to understand the new information coming from the senses, information from LTS could be brought into STS and be processed together to gather a new meaning, which makes STS the place in which the current processing activity occurs. Finally, since STS only has limited capacity, some information needs to be moved into LTS, which is more permanent and has unlimited capacity.

Tybout et al. (1981) add that individuals store any association between an object and any information linked to that object (e.g., a rumour), in their memory. When an individual evaluates the object, she/he retrieves any information from the STS and LTS regarding the object, and any other attribute related to it. The evaluation of the object has become less positive than it would have been in the absence of it. Even though the object, in this case, a rumour, is very unlikely to be true, and consumers might not believe it, they are still affected because they have processed the rumour. Accordingly, this theory can explain why the rumour has an impact on consumers even though it is untrue and why a persuasive refutation strategy might be ineffective.

This theory can be used to explain why consumers construct different perceptions after reading some reviews. As described above, this happens because, in the process of forming

perception, consumers combine the information from their STS (including the reviews) and their LTS (including any associated attribute relevant to the information). This information could be different between consumers, which results in different perceptions. As a consequence of the process described earlier, this theory does not endorse the practice of giving a refutation message (i.e., hospitality firms' interventions) as it merely induces a further reminder about the issue (i.e., the complaint made in the review). The hospitality firm's intervention in the form of a response to the (negative) review, increases rehearsal of the (negative) review and strengthens the stored association. Even if the response were utterly persuasive so that consumers retrieve the intended thought, this thought is still less positive than other thoughts that might be retrieved in the absence of response (Tybout, Calder and Sternthal, 1981, p. 74).

Further, there are three frameworks determining information processing; sequential processing, dual processing under a dichotomous approach, and dual processing under an interactive approach (Jun and Vogt, 2013, p. 193). The sequential model assumes that the process of analysing information happens in several stages in sequence. Only a message that has been processed in the lower stage can be processed in the higher stage; attitude changes are caused by the information processed at the highest stage (Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984 in ibid., p.195).

On the contrary, the dual-process model assumes that two different processing modes independently occur and both processing modes affect attitude changes in different ways (Jun and Vogt, 2013, p. 195). This model suggests that individuals have two memory systems to meet conflicting demands; an individual's level of involvement moderates the decision about which system is used for a particular information processing task. The two systems consist of a fast-learning system and a slow-learning system, which are also known as slow-processing or effortful processing and fast processing or effortless processing (the central and peripheral routes in the Elaboration Likelihood Model, and systematic and heuristic processing in the heuristic-systematic model). This model is also referred to as the dual-system theory (McCabe, Li and Chen, 2016), which is discussed in section 2.2.1.

2.5   Summary: The Importance of Investigating Online Consumer Reviews and Firms' Intervention from Three perspectives

The main concern of this thesis is the decision-making process when tourists are trying to choose accommodation products. Tourists need reliable information to make optimal decisions. As argued in the previous discussion, consumers prefer online consumer reviews (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013) over a company's advertising because they are seen as a more

trustworthy source of information (Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay, 2015). They have been considered as the most important external information source for travellers (Gursoy, 2019) among tourists seeking quality assurance (Jeacle and Carter, 2011).

When tourists search for information on these online consumer review platforms (e.g., TripAdvisor, Booking.com), they often see hotels' responses accompanying reviews because many hotels want to be more active in the relationship (O'Connor, 2010b; Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012; Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015; Schuckert, Liu and Law, 2015; Xie, So and Wang, 2017; Grégoire *et al.*, 2018). Consumer reviews, together with firms' responses then inform tourists expectation about the accommodation, which they process and evaluate.

There are numerous literatures regarding online consumer reviews and several on firms' intervention. However, most of these studies are interested in consumer's perspective. Research which accounts for reviewers' point of view (e.g., Bronner and de Hoog, 2011; Tripp and Grégoire, 2011; Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015) are lacking, probably because finding reviewers is more difficult than finding people who have read and used reviews (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011). Furthermore, the company's perspective is even more neglected (Park and Allen, 2013). This represents an important omission, since they are key actors, contributing communication into the online review space.

Moreover, there is hardly any research integrating all the three actors' perspectives, which according to Wei, Miao and Huang (2013), is important to see how they interact with each other. The information gained from this research can give a more thorough understanding, which is important to consider when companies are making a strategy for their competitive advantage. The summary of research investigating online consumer reviews and firms' intervention is outlined in Table 2-3.

From the table, we can see that most studies have used quantitative methodology investigating only several actors involved in the relationship. Not only that, some of them only concerned in one type of reviews (i.e., only positive or negative reviews). This is resulting in a partial understanding of the relationship. Therefore, the present study is conducted in order to investigate online consumer reviews from all perspectives available in the relationship. Interviews are deemed as the most suitable method to collect data as it will provide more thorough information which will lead to more holistic information about the topic.

Table 2-3 List of Studies on Online Consumer Reviews and Firms' Interventions

No.	Author(s) and Year	Title	Type of review investigated	Actor(s) Investigated	Methodology	Platform(s)	Sample
1	(Tripp and Grégoire, 2011)	When Unhappy Customers Strike Back on the Internet	negative	current complainers	codifying and analysing 431 on-line complaints	ripoffreport.com and consumeraffairs.com	online complaints
2	(Levy, Duan, and Boo, 2012)	An Analysis of One-Star Online Reviews and Responses in the Washington, D.C., Lodging Market	negative	online consumer reviews and hospitality firms' response	content analysis	ten popular online review websites	1,946 one-star reviews from ten popular online review websites, as well as 225 management responses from eighty-six Washington, D.C., hotels
3	(van Noort and Willemsen, 2012)	Online Damage Control: The Effects of Proactive Versus Reactive Webcare Interventions in Consumer-generated and Brand-generated Platforms	negative	Potential customer	Experiment (online)	(fictitious) blogpost	163 participants from the university website and several social media such as Facebook,
4	(Mauri and Minazzi, 2013)	Web reviews influence on expectations and purchasing intentions of potential hotel customers	mainly investigated the influence of the reviews on purchasing intention	Potential customer	Experiment (online)	(fictitious) TripAdvisor	349 young adults involved in an online experiment (university students or graduates)
5	(S.-Y. Park and Allen, 2013)	Responding to Online Reviews: Problem Solving and Engagement in Hotels	positive and negative	hotel's management	case study, triangulated in-depth interviews with the managers, hotel's responses to online reviews and the hotel's official policies or brand strategy documents	TripAdvisor	four high-end hotels in the western United States
6	(Wei, Miao, and Huang, 2013)	Customer engagement behaviours and hotel responses	positive and negative	Potential customer	Experiment (online)	(fictitious) TripAdvisor	101 undergraduate students
7	(Cheng and Loi, 2014)	Handling Negative Online Customer Reviews: The Effects of Elaboration Likelihood Model and Distributive Justice	negative	Potential customer	Experiment (online)	(fictitious) TripAdvisor	a quasi-experimental design with 259 Chinese undergraduate students in Macau
8	(Xie, Zhang, and Zhang, 2014)	The business value of online consumer reviews and management response to hotel performance	positive and negative	panel data analysis of online consumer reviews and management responses of 843 hotels on a hotel review website	econometric	TripAdvisor	Consumer reviews, management responses and hotel information are auto-parsed from TripAdvisor.com using two crawlers

9	(Ma, Sun, and Kekre, 2015)	The Squeaky Wheel Gets the Grease — An Empirical Analysis of Customer Voice and Firm Intervention on Twitter	negative	the complainants	model a customer's underlying relationship with the firm and its dynamic evolution using a hidden-Markov model uses a unique panel data set obtained from a For- tune 500 company	Twitter	data set contains all of the messages relevant to the firm posted by customers on Twitter from February 2010 to December 2010
10	(Min, Lim, and Magnini, 2015)	Factors Affecting Customer Satisfaction in Responses to Negative Online Hotel Reviews: The Impact of Empathy, Paraphrasing, and Speed	negative	Potential customer	Experiment (offline)	(fictitious) TripAdvisor	176 university students
11	(Sparks, So, and Bradley, 2016)	Responding to negative online reviews: The effects of hotel responses on customer inferences of trust and concern	negative	Potential customer	Experiment (online)	(fictitious) TripAdvisor	1200 respondents who had stayed at a hotel and travelled domestically or internationally in the past twelve months was drawn from a national consumer panel managed by a privacy law-compliant market list company in Australia
12	(Wang, T., Wezel, F. C., and Forgues, B., 2016)	Protecting market identity: When and how do organizations respond to consumers' devaluations?	negative	hotel's management action	quantitative method	TripAdvisor	a dataset of London hospitality firms' responses to online reviews posted on TripAdvisor during the period 2002–2012 lend
13	Current research	The Dynamics of Online Consumer Reviews and Hospitality firms' Intervention in Tourism Marketing	positive and negative	current reviewers, potential tourists and hospitality firms	interviews	online consumer review websites	24 reviewers, 24 potential tourists and 12 hospitality firms

2.6   Research Questions

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to explore the interplay between online consumer reviews and the company's intervention from the perspectives of reviewers, potential guests and hospitality firms by asking the following research questions:

1. How do reviewers, potential guests and hospitality firms perceive online consumer reviews and company's response to reviews?
2. What strategies do consumers and hospitality firms employ in interpreting online consumer reviews?
3. How do hospitality firms respond to consumer reviews?
4. What are the implications of the interaction between consumer reviews and hospitality firms' interventions for tourism and service marketing?

Chapter 3.   Methodology

3.1   Overview of the chapter

Every research is governed by a philosophical framework which shapes how the researcher defines the problem to be addressed, the approach to the research design and determines the way the research is conducted. Each step of the research process should be appropriate to or should fit with, the purpose and focus of the research (Quinlan, 2011). At the beginning of a research project, four important aspects need to be considered: the methods to be used, the methodology which will govern the use of methods, the theoretical perspectives which lie behind the methodology, and the epistemology which informs the theoretical perspective (Crotty, 2009).

This thesis is interested in exploring different actors' perspectives and strategies regarding online consumer reviews, and the implications of online interactions between service providers and customers in review environments. Therefore, it was important to adopt a qualitative approach, using interviews, to enable a more thorough understanding of the different perspectives and to explore opinions and implications. Unlike a survey or an experiment, qualitative approaches provide researchers with greater flexibility to explore perceptions, opinions and behaviours and allows respondents the freedom to express their feelings about the issue under investigation. This leads to an ability to collect rich data and develop a more in-depth understanding of the phenomena by presenting the perspectives of all actors involved. Furthermore, surveys cannot be used to measure behaviour (Dolnicar, 2018) while experiments focus on observed behaviour which limits "researchers' ability to investigate the psychological processes underlying that behaviour" (Gneezy, 2016, p. 140).

This chapter highlights the philosophical and methodological approaches adopted in this study and its associated beliefs and assumptions. This chapter also explains the methodology and the research design selected. The organisation of the chapter is based on Crotty's research elements (2009), firstly justifying the choice of epistemology, social constructionism, as fitting the context for this study. Next, the theoretical perspective for the study is explained, outlining why interpretivism was selected, followed by an elaboration of the qualitative methodology used. This is followed by a section on the data collection method used, describing the research design, the interview protocol, and procedure as well as the sampling method and participant selection. Finally, the section ends with the discussion about the data analysis, where the coding process and the development of the thematic analysis process is discussed. Quality issues and research ethics are also considered.

3.2   Research philosophy; epistemology and theoretical perspective

A range of different labels can be applied to discussions of research philosophy. For example, Guba and Lincoln use the term research paradigm to describe the "basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of the method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways" (1994, p. 105). Meanwhile, Deshpande described it as a set of linked assumptions about the world which is shared by a community of scientists investigating that world (1983). Even though these definitions have a similar meaning, eventually, these two pieces of literature assign different labels to any given paradigm. According to the former approach, there are four paradigms, namely, positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), while the latter identifies only two distinct research paradigms, namely the qualitative and quantitative (Deshpande, 1983).

Other than that, the same label is also assigned to different terms. For example, one perspective states that there are two approaches in research, namely positivist and interpretive, where each has its own ontological, axiological and epistemological assumptions (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). However, others argue that there are three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry, namely, interpretivism, hermeneutics and social constructionism (Schwandt, 2000). While yet another claims that there are four elements of research whereby objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism are positioned as the epistemology, while positivism, interpretivism, critical inquiry, feminism, postmodernism are described as theoretical perspectives (Crotty, 2009). To avoid confusion, this thesis chooses to subscribe to Crotty's schema and tries to consistently utilise his terms.

The first element is the epistemology, which concerns the theory of knowledge (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2015). This relates to knowledge, to what constitutes knowledge, and to the processes through which knowledge is created (Quinlan, 2011), or also can be explained merely as *how we know what we know* (Crotty, 2009). According to Crotty, there are three existing epistemologies, namely objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism:

> *Objectivist epistemology holds that meaning, and therefore meaningful reality exists as such apart from the operation of any consciousness. Constructionism rejects this view of human knowledge; there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. Meaning is not discovered but constructed. According to constructionism, different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the*

> *same phenomenon. In subjectivism, meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object, but it is imposed on the object by the subject. According to this epistemology, meaning comes from anything but an interaction between the subject and the object to which it is ascribed (Crotty, 2009, p. 9).*

I[1] strongly believe Elizabeth Hirschman when she said that "science is created by people, and though infrequently acknowledged is therefore subject to influence from the attitude, personalities, ideologies and values of the human being that creates it" (1985, p. 225). Furthermore, I also believe that people perceive something based on their "cultural frame of reference" (Thompson, 2006, p. 441) and their field of experience. Therefore, I believe that "multiple realities exist" (Takhar and Chitakunye, 2012) as people, who have different frames of reference and field experience, construct different meanings regarding the same 'reality'. I found myself more aligned with the constructionist epistemology therefore the study aims to understand the different perceptions of actors (hospitality firms, potential tourists and people who had posted online reviews) about a phenomenon. This is because of an appreciation that different actors will likely have varying constructions and meanings that they place on their experience of online review environments, and I wanted to understand and appreciate these different experiences, rather than search for external causes and fundamental laws explaining their behaviour (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2015). The focus of the research then lies in discovering how participants make sense of the phenomena, which involves making sense of participants' experiences regarding online consumer reviews and firms' interventions (Cunliffe, 2008).

Regarding this particular epistemology, there are several terms used in the literature: constructionism, constructivism and social constructionism which often refer to similar things. Constructionism is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of the interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty, 2009). Constructivism holds that knowledge is not an objective reflection of reality but, instead, is the result of our own (i.e., subjective) cognitive processes (Watzlawick, 1984, cited in Guterman, 2013).

Alternatively, constructivism holds that human knowledge is biologically based, whereas social constructionism contends that ideas are located in the domain of language between

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[1] The first-person point of view is used often in this chapter as these philosophical assumptions are personal and represent the views of the writer.

persons, and emphasises the idea that society is actively and creatively produced by human beings (Guterman, 2013). Furthermore, the 'social' in social constructionism is about the mode of meaning generation and not about the kind of object that has meaning, for example, the interaction may be with the natural world – the sunset or the mountains – but it is our culture that teaches us to see them – and in some cases whether or not to see them (Crotty, 2009, p. 55). It is one of a group of approaches that Habermas (1970) has referred to as 'interpretive methods' (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2015, p. 52). Similarly, social constructionism and social constructivism hold that social phenomena develop in social contexts and that individuals and groups create, in part, their own realities (Quinlan, 2011, p. 96).

Even though several scholars do not make any distinction between the terms constructivism and constructionism and/or social constructionism (Crotty, 2009), it can be concluded that the distinction occurs because of the word 'social'. Constructivists focus on what is happening within the minds or brains of individuals, while social constructionists focus on what is happening between people as they join together to create realities (Guterman, 2013). Furthermore, we are all constructivists if we believe that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge (Schwandt, 2000). Based on that definition, it can be concluded that this study's epistemology is social constructionist and/or constructivism because the study is interested in what is happening between the reviewers and hospitality firms and the meanings for other potential guests. I assume that research participants develop a particular perception after reading material (this could be the review and/or its reply) on an online consumer review website (e.g., TripAdvisor or Booking.com). Further, I also believe that different perceptions may be assigned to the same message because of the diversity of the participants' background. I appreciate the different constructions and meanings that participants place upon reading the review and/or the reply from hospitality firms. It is within this context that the interplay between reviews and hospitality firms' responses exists.

The second research element is the theoretical perspective. A theoretical perspective comprises the assumptions adopted within a methodology which provide a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria, or, it is the methodology's underlying philosophical stance (Crotty, 2009). Consistent with the constructionist epistemology, I believe that "access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments" (Myers, 2013, p. 39). Therefore, I found interpretivism to be a proper theoretical perspective for my approach to exploring reality because interpretivism "holds that social reality is a subjective construction based on interpretation and interaction" (Quinlan, 2011, p. 96). Further, "interpretivists seek

to describe many perceived realities that cannot be known a priori because they are time and context-specific" (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988, p. 513). Interpretation is "an improvisational process in which the researcher draws from his or her stock of background knowledge and personal experience to derive insight from textual data (such as an interview transcript)" (Thompson, 2006, p. 451).

Taking on these assumptions, the thesis seeks to explore many perceived realities about consumer reviews and hoteliers' responses, shaped by the three different groups of participants experiencing the same phenomena: the changing nature of the tourism marketing information landscape, which is now dominated by online customer reviews. The thesis aims to explore the interplay between consumer reviews and firms' replies, through the meanings that potential guests, reviewers and hospitality firms given to them. The inclusion of all groups involved in the consumer reviews-hospitality firms' intervention phenomena is important as the thesis aims to produce "a holistic overall inquiry" (Noy, 2008, p. 334). Therefore, it is clear that qualitative methodology is the best avenue to conduct the research. Producing holistic knowledge is possible by analysing texts from the participants' interview transcripts and drawing conclusions based on knowledge derived from the literature. It should be noted that using this perspective; the interview process is a process of collaboration between two parties and not a passive one-way communication from one party (Miles and Huberman, 1994). By conducting the interviews, the thesis is interested in seeing the social world from the point of view of the actors (Bryman, 1984).

3.3   Selection of Qualitative Methodology

Methodology is "the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes" (Crotty, 2009, p. 3). Regarding the debate about quantitative and qualitative methodologies posed by Bryman (1984), Crotty emphasises that the distinction between the two methodologies occurs at the level of methods and does not occur at the level of epistemology or theoretical perspective (Crotty, 2009). Our research's purpose can be served by either a qualitative or quantitative research approach, or both (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 2009). Furthermore, there will not be any problem in conducting quantitative and qualitative research at the same time, but there will be a problem with the attempt to "to be at once objectivist and constructionist (or subjectivist), … [for example] to say that there is objective meaning and, in the same breath, to say that there is no objective meaning certainly does appear contradictory" (Crotty, 2009, p. 15).

Therefore, it is possible for me, having aligned myself as a social constructionist and interpretivist, to choose either a qualitative or quantitative methodology, or both, for this study. However, as explained above, the thesis is interested in seeing the world from the viewpoint of the actors (Hannabuss, 1996) It aims to present new insights regarding consumer reviews and hospitality firms' responses, by conducting "a holistic overall inquiry" (Noy, 2008, p. 334) and combining all three perspectives in one study. Therefore, the thesis follows Myers' (2013, p. 9) suggestion that "qualitative research is best if you want to study a particular subject in depth". Additionally, since the thesis is interested in the different perceptions that these actors place upon the issues, which in some cases may contradict each other, therefore, a qualitative approach is deemed to be more appropriate because it facilitates the highlighting of contradictions in the explanatory powers of the coded data (Burton and Khammash, 2010).

The decision to use a qualitative methodology in the study also corresponds with a call for more qualitative research in consumer research, which is still being dominated by the positivistic paradigm (Shankar and Goulding, 2001). Meanwhile, as "a socially constructed enterprise", marketing needs the input from a humanistic mode of inquiry specifically developed to address socially constructed phenomena (Hirschman, 1986, p. 236). Having situated the thesis in the tourism and marketing context, I align with the views of Hirschman. I believe that a qualitative methodology is the most suitable to be employed because it enables the researcher to study a particular subject in-depth (Myers, 2013) and "involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013, p. 6).

Almost all studies on online consumer reviews in tourism have adopted a positivist approach and addressed the issues from a single actor point of view, thereby omitting a broader-based understanding of the interaction effects of different actors on the meanings attached to reviews and responses from service providers (examples are provided in Table 2-3). Combining the perspectives of all of the actors in the process is challenging for positivist research perspectives. As a result, these studies can only explain the phenomenon partially. This thesis fills the gap and investigates the perception of the reviewers, the potential guests and the hospitality firms about online consumer reviews and firms' responses. This highlights the need for a qualitative methodology.

The findings from the thesis, as a result of the methodology chosen, will enrich the literature because, as shown in Table 2-3, it is concluded that most research about firms' interventions in response to customer reviews in an online environment is quantitative. These researchers were mostly conducting experiments while some others surveyed the customers or gathered datasets from TripAdvisor and were generating descriptive statistics, correlations or other

statistical operations. Only one qualitative research study was identified, which conducted in-depth interviews with hotels' managers triangulated with hotels' responses to online reviews and hotels' official policies or brand strategy documents (Park and Allen, 2013). This preference towards a quantitative approach has led to limited knowledge in specific areas; thus, qualitative or mixed-method approaches may give better leverage (Cohen, Prayag and Moital, 2014).

Based on the above discussion, the decision to use qualitative methodology is justified because it concerns an understanding of human behaviour from "the actor's frame of reference" (Deshpande, 1983, p. 103). Only a qualitative approach can be used to explore the three actors' perceptions about the meanings of reviews, and the interplay between reviews and firms' responses as experienced by the three actors. This choice is reinforced with the fact that quantitative methodologies emphasise fixed measurements and hypothesis testing (Alan Bryman, 1984), the associated methods such as surveys and experiments cannot be used to address the research aim.

Qualitative data is generally collected using some type of interviews or observations (Hair *et al.*, 2011). Achieving the aim of the study is only possible through an open-ended probing which enables the production of new insights from the qualitative methodology (Bryman, 2006). I believe that new insights will be able to be identified when the participants are given the freedom to express their perceptions without having to choose from a predefined list. The following sections discuss in more detail the choice of data collection method, its procedure, sampling and recruitment process and, finally, the data analysis process.

3.4   Methods

Methods are "the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis" (Crotty, 2009, p. 3). Based on this definition, this particular section discusses specifically the data collection technique chosen for the thesis, followed by its procedure. This section continues with a discussion about the sampling and participant recruitment process. Finally, the section ends with a discussion about the data analysis process.

3.4.1   Using a semi-structured interview to collect data

"Much of what we cannot observe for ourselves has been or is being observed by others" (Stake, 1995, p. 64). Qualitative research is aimed at discovering and portraying multiple views of the case by utilising the interview as the main road to multiple realities. An interview is "a face to face verbal exchange, in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit

information or expressions of opinion or belief from another person or persons" (Svend Brinkmann, 2018, p. 578). According to Myers and Newman (2007, p. 3), "qualitative interview is the most common and one of the most important data gathering tools in qualitative research". It is a "superior technique for tapping subjects on their knowledge about their experiences and/or social practices" (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14). The response of an interview is not "simply a true or false report on reality; instead, it displays of perspectives about cultural resources" (Silverman, 2014, p. 197). Therefore, the suitability of interview as the primary data collection method in this thesis is apparent.

There are several types of interviews which can be utilised, including structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviewing (Fontana and Frey, 2000). In structured interviewing, the interviewer asks all respondents the same series of pre-established questions in the same order. Unstructured interviewing is very much different from the first one as it does not have any a priori category to follow, which will then limit the interview itself. While semi-structured interviewing is like a combination between the two types mentioned above of interviews. Although it has some predefined set of questions, the interviewer can always improvise new questions during the interview, following up the interviewee's answer (Myers, 2013).

Another way to classify types of interview is to make a distinction between individual interviews and group interviews (Myers, 2013). A group interview is where an interviewer is asking questions to a group of people at the same time. The interviewer will be a moderator who asks questions and also responsible for managing the interaction between interviewees (Fontana and Frey, 2000). The purpose is to get collective views on a specifically defined topic of interest from a group of people who are known to have had certain experiences through a thoughtful discussion (Myers, 2013).

Conducting an interview requires skills such as intensive listening and note-taking as well as careful planning and preparation (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Similar to any other data collection methods, interviews can also be potentially tricky and problematic. As much as the researcher wants to remain neutral and not take sides in the conversation, the interaction in the interview can lead the interviewee to a particular side resulting from a simple gesture (e.g. facial expression, intonation, etc.) from the interviewer which cannot be fully controlled (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Myers and Newman (2007, pp. 4–5) summarise several problems and pitfalls from an interview such as the artificiality of the interview, lack of trust, lack of time, level of entry, elite bias, Hawthorne effects, constructing knowledge, the ambiguity of language and finally, interviews can go wrong because the interviewer unintentionally offends the interviewee.

Regarding these problems and pitfalls, the following techniques from Hannabuss (1996, p. 26) can be utilised: first, establishing rapport while keeping the conversation going; second, asking open questions which avoid yes/no answers while avoid using jargons and abstractions; third, avoid double negatives and complicated questions; fourth, do not interrupt and assign pace for the conversation while still focusing on the interview – even silence is good for the process; fifth, remain non-judgemental. More elaborate discussion about how the researcher managed to overcome these problems is available on the following section 3.4.2.

Having considered the aim of the thesis as well as researcher's ability, the decision was made to conduct individual semi-structured interviews. By utilising this type of interview, the participants are also allowed to elaborate on their response, resulting in a deeper understanding of the phenomena being investigated (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Several semi-structured interviews were conducted with the reviewers to explore their perceptions and feelings about the response from the hotel and how it changed their assessment of a hotel's service quality which led them to write the review in the first place. The interviews were also conducted to assess the reviewers' perception of the firms' intervention. I also completed several individual semi-structured interviews with the potential guests to understand the process happening when they read a review and its reply from the hotel. Finally, I interviewed several managers from hospitality firms to understand how reviews change their perception of tourists' expectations and how they have been handling the reviews.

3.4.2   The interview protocols

Interview questions were generated based on the research aims and questions, which were developed through the literature review process. Three sets of open-ended interview schedules for each group of participant (available in appendix A, B and C) were prepared guided by themes from the literature as well as some probes to elicit more elaborate responses (Qu and Dumay, 2011). These guides are all consists of questions about online consumer reviews, firms' intervention, communication components, consumer decision-making process, and service quality. These were developed over multiple rounds of revision in consultation with supervisors and following a pilot testing (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

According to Castillo-Montoya (2016), an interview schedule should consist of four parts: introductory questions, transition questions, key questions and closing questions. The researcher began constructing key questions for each of the themes, as well as questions for the introduction, transition and closing. The questions should have a balance between

inquiry and conversations (ibid); they should give guidance to the interviewer without stifling their creativity (Myers, 2013).

Table 3-1 Types of interview questions

Type of Questions	Explanation	Examples in the study
Introductory	Questions that are relatively neutral eliciting general and non-intrusive information and that are not threatening	Please, could you tell me a little bit about yourself? or Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself and your work, your role?
Transition	Questions that link the introductory questions to the key questions to be asked	How do you usually choose your hotel? or Please tell me more about your clients?
Key	Questions that are most related to the research questions and purpose of the study	Why did you post a review? or Why did you read a review? or What do you think about the reviews on social media? (all under the "review" theme)
Closing	Questions that are easy to answer and provide an opportunity for closure	Do you have anything else to add to this interview?

(Castillo-Montoya, 2016, p. 823)

After constructing the questions, I moved on to the third phase: receiving feedback. The questions were submitted to the supervisors and were revised several times based on their suggestions. Afterwards, the questions were also disseminated via the PhD annual review process to obtain further feedback. Suggestions and feedback were received regarding the tone of voice, length of questions, comprehension and also about the structure. The final questions as shown on appendix A, B and C are the results of both examiner and supervisors' feedback.

Finally, after feedback was received, and questions were revised, I conducted the fourth phase, which is conducting the pilot interview. This phase is important as I can have "a realistic sense of how long the interview takes and whether participants indeed are able to answer questions" (Castillo-Montoya, 2016, p. 827). Since resources were limited, only one pilot study for each interview guide was conducted. However, I was able to take note of things that need to be improved, made some final revisions (e.g., to the wording and order of the questions) and prepared to launch the study. The pilot study enabled a reflection and further identification of important considerations, such as two voice recorders for extra safekeeping.

Interviews were conducted in several places: participants' establishments, the university library, or cafes. I made sure that the situation was convenient so that the interviews can be recorded without too many noises. The interviews always began with an introduction, where I introduced myself while explaining the research, the outline of the research as well as handed out a form containing information for research participants (can be found in appendix

D, E and F). The interviewee was given the form to be read, and at the same time, I also asked for interviewee's consent, as well as informing them that the interview was being audio recorded. The interviewee gave their verbal consent, and the interview was recorded throughout the whole process. The recordings of the interviews were then listened to for transcription purposes.

Regarding the techniques to eliminate problems and pitfalls mentioned in section 3.4.1, during the interview process, rapport was established by making an introduction to the participant, as well as by explaining the topic and aim of the research. The latter is especially important because the perception that the participants develop about what the research wants to find out might be incorrect, which results in inaccurate responses to the questions (Alvesson, 2003). Furthermore, rapport was established by allowing the participants to introduce themselves and to share some experience about the topic. For example, during the interviews, I always asked about participants' experience of having a holiday, after introducing myself and explaining the research. This technique melts the awkward situation and functions as an entry point to more 'serious' questions related to the study.

Furthermore, I mobilised the second and third techniques: asking open-ended questions. All questions in the interview guidelines were posed in an open-ended format, and when conducting the interviews, the interviewer tried really hard to avoid posing a yes/no question. Jargon was avoided as much as possible, and the questions were formulated in as simple a form as possible. I also tried to apply technique number four, namely, not to interrupt the participants and assigning an appropriate pace for them. This practice was sometimes hard to be conducted for some participants, as they have limited time, and I felt that all questions had to be asked within that limited time. However, most of the times this technique was successfully applied, resulting in several long interviews (the longest was 133 minutes and 10 seconds, the shortest was 17 minutes and 15 seconds, averaging in 32 minutes and 14 seconds).

Finally, the most challenging technique was to remain non-judgemental. I put my best efforts into staying non-judgemental during the interviews. However, mainly because the specific words used, gestures, note-taking behaviour and so on can affect the interviewee (Alvesson, 2003), this last technique becomes a little bit hard to follow. There were probably some instances of body language, facial expressions or gestures which were unintentionally considered to be judgemental by interviewees. The body language was intentionally expressed to signify active listening and to probe for more explanations from the interviewee (Qu and Dumay, 2011), but was perceived differently by the interviewee. This happens because of my lack of experience, and by further practice can be rectified.

3.4.3 Sampling and participant recruitment process

Purposeful sampling, which "requires selecting individuals and sites of study which can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study, is mainly used in qualitative research" (Creswell, 1998, p. 125). According to Hair *et al.* (2011), purposive sampling is also a form of convenience sampling in which the selection of the sample element is conducted based on the researcher's judgement. Further, individual solicitations, snowballing, or invitations through listservs, message boards, discussion groups, or personal research websites (Meho, 2006) could be used to recruit participants. Based on these opinions, the researcher assigned several criteria for recruiting participants as follows:

1. The participants from the hotel group should be persons who actively manage the monitoring of, and response to, reviews.
2. The participants from the reviewer group should be individuals who have written at least one review about an accommodation on a consumer review website.
3. The participants from the potential guest group should be individuals who have had an experience of reading reviews about an accommodation before making a booking decision.

One point worth making here is that initially, I was trying to recruit the reviewers by sending the invitation to participate via the link provided in each reviewer's profile on TripAdvisor. TripAdvisor was used as a starting point because it is the largest travel community in the world (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides, 2012; Cabiddu, Carlo and Piccoli, 2014) and is most used site by tourists for information searching (Miguéns, Baggio and Costa, 2008; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). I sent more than one hundred emails to reviewers who reviewed hotels in Nottingham using the link, but unfortunately only received one response. Therefore, another strategy had to be adopted, as access to interviewees is often difficult to establish (Qu and Dumay, 2011).

A call for participants was subsequently advertised on an online platform. However, this was also not successful, probably because no monetary return was offered. Eventually, I started the "common sense" process (Goulding, 2005, p. 296) and used the above criteria to search for participants who were easily accessible (i.e., friends and relatives). As also experienced by previous researchers, in which finding reviewers is more difficult than finding people who have read and used reviews to inform their decisions (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011), the researcher finally utilised the single criteria mentioned above when recruiting reviewers.

The same method was also used to find potential guests for an interview (i.e., convenience sampling). There were situations where some potential participants can act as a reviewer and a potential tourist. However, because finding a reviewer was more challenging than finding a potential guest, these participants then assigned to the reviewer group. Furthermore, to be able to interview more participants for the reviewer and potential tourist groups, snowball sampling was also employed. Using this sampling method, the researcher was able to access more participants based on information from other participants (Noy, 2008). Eventually, purposive and convenience sampling, as well as snowball sampling, were used to obtain access to the reviewers and potential guests.

I had better luck with recruiting participants from hospitality firms' group. However, it was not without a glitch. Firstly, I obtained a list of hotels by accessing TripAdvisor and searching for hotels in Nottingham. Every hotel's review page was then examined for review response activity on the platform. An invitation to participate was then sent to hotels which were actively responding to reviews via the email address advertised on TripAdvisor or on their website. However, the response rate was not good. Thirty hotels were contacted by emails, but only five responded with four positive response. Therefore, follow up calls to each hotel were made to try to speak to the person responsible for replying the reviews. Even though sometimes it was hard to find the appropriate person to communicate with about the research, once the key person had been identified, most of them were willing to participate. Appointments were made after the correct person was given an email explaining about the research.

At the end of the process, I recruited 12 hospitality firms, 31 reviewers and 21 potential guests as research participants. Regarding the sample size required for qualitative research, qualitative theorists do not agree on optimal sample size, but instead approach the concept of theoretical saturation (Beitin, 2012). A more critical issue in a qualitative study is "making sure that the people interviewed represent various voices" (Myers, 2013, p. 123). However, "because of vague guidelines on the use of saturation, a priori sample size will remain a part of qualitative research" (Beitin, 2012, p. 244). Therefore, even though a particular number was set at the beginning of the study, theoretical saturation was also carefully observed during the data analysis process.

3.4.4 Participants' profiles

3.4.4.1 Profile of reviewers and potential guests

Since the contact information is provided by other participants (Noy, 2008), the snowball sampling utilised in this study has provided the study with a quite similar characteristic of participants in the reviewers and potential guests groups. The majority of participants were female PhD students aged 30-39 years and single. Table 3-2 shows the profile of interviewees from reviewers and potential guests' groups, while Table 3-3 summarises the characteristics of these participants.

Table 3-2 Profile of participants from potential guest and reviewer

Interview ID	Origin	Occupation	Role	Age	Status
ID 1	Asia	PhD student & lecturer	R	29	Single
ID 2	Asia	PhD student & doctor	R	30s	Married
ID 3	America	PhD student & lecturer	PG	39	Married with children
ID 4	British	University worker	R	50s	Married
ID 5	Asia	PhD student & doctor	R	42	Married with children
ID 6	Asia	PhD student & lecturer	R	31	Married with children
ID 7	Asia	PhD student & lecturer	PG	30s	Married with children
ID 8	British	University worker	R	29	Single
ID 9	Africa	PhD student & lecturer	PG	30s	Married
ID 10	Asia	PhD student	PG	28	Single
ID 11	Asia	PhD student	R	30	Married
ID 12	Asia	PhD student	R	30s	Single
ID 13	Asia	Master student	PG	24	Single
ID 14	Asia	PhD student	R	28	Single
ID 15	Asia	PhD student & lecturer	R	30	Married
ID 16	Asia	PhD student & lecturer	PG	27	Single
ID 17	Asia	PhD student	R	30	Married with children
ID 18	Asia	PhD student	R	31	Single
ID 19	British	PhD student	R	31	Single
ID 20	Asia	PhD student & lecturer	R	30	Married with children
ID 21	Asia	PhD student & lecturer	PG	31	Single
ID 22	Europe	PhD student & lecturer	R	36	Married with children
ID 23	British	PhD student & nurse	R	30	Single with partner
ID 24	Africa	PhD student	PG	31	Single
ID 25	British	PhD student & doctor	PG	38	Married with children
ID 26	Africa	PhD student & government official	R	35	Married with children
ID 27	Asia	PhD student & doctor	R	38	Married with children
ID 28	British	PhD student	R	24	Single
ID 29	British	PhD student	PG	above 20	Single
ID 30	Africa	PhD student	PG	29	Single
ID 31	Africa	PhD student	PG	26	Married
ID 32	America	PhD student	R	30	Single
ID 33	Europe	PhD student	R	24	Single

ID 34	British	PhD student	R	24	Single
ID 35	Asia	PhD student	PG	24	Single
ID 36	America	PhD student & lecturer	R	27	Single
ID 37	Asia	PhD student	PG	27	Single
ID 38	Asia	PhD student	R	33	Single
ID 39	Europe	PhD student	PG	35	Married
ID 40	British	PhD student	PG	30s	Married
ID 41	British	Self employed	PG	35	Single
ID 42	Europe	University worker	R	47	Married with children
ID 43	British	University worker	R	63	Married with children
ID 44	British	University worker	R	39	Single with partner
ID 45	British	Retired	PG	65	Married with children
ID 46	British	Retired	PG	69	Married with children
ID 47	British	University worker	R	49	Married
ID 48	Europe	University worker	R	mid 40	Single
ID 49	British	Teacher	R	49	Single
ID 50	British	Charity worker	R	60	Married with children
ID 51	British	Housewife	PG	30s	Married with children
ID 52	British	Housewife	PG	35	Married with children

* Please note that during the analysis in chapter 4 and 5, the ID is used accompanied by the marker 'R' for a reviewer and 'PG' for a potential guest.

Gender and age.

Table 3-3 shows that there were more female (64.71%) participants than male (35.29%) participants. The biggest group of participants (50.98%) were between the ages of 30 and 39; followed by the age group of 24 to 29 (29.41%), and then the age group of over 40 (11.76%). The smallest group comprised those over 50 years old (7.84%).

Table 3-3 Characteristics of participants from potential guest and reviewer

Gender	
Female	64.71%
Male	35.29%
Age	
24-29	29.41%
30-39	50.98%
>40	11.76%
>50	7.84%
Occupation	
PhD student & lecturer	23.53%
PhD student & doctor	5.88%
University worker	11.76%
PhD student	41.18%
Self-employed	1.96%
Teacher	3.92%
PhD student & nurse	1.96%
Master student	1.96%
Retired	1.96%
Charity worker	1.96%
Unemployed	1.96%
Housewife	1.96%
Status	
Single	49.02%
Married	17.65%
Married with children	29.41%
Single with children	3.92%

Occupational status.

Table 3-3 shows that the majority of participants (41.18%) were PhD students and PhD students who were also lecturers (23.53%). The other participants were university workers (11.76%), PhD students who were also working as doctors (5.88%), and teachers (3.92%). The rest of the participants included an entrepreneur, a PhD student who was also a nurse, a master student, a retiree, a charity worker, an unemployed person and a housewife (each comprises 1.96% of the sample).

Marital status.

According to Table 3-3, the majority of participants were single (49.02%), while the rest of them were married with children (29.41%), married (17.65%) and single with children (3.62%).

National origin.

According to Figure 3-1, 39% of the participants were from Asia. They were originally from Jordan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, China, Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam, and Bahrain. Meanwhile, 35% of the participants were British (English and Scots), and 10% of them were from elsewhere in Europe (Finland, France, Turkey, Romania and Poland). Another 10% of the participants were from Africa (Uganda, Nigeria, Gambia, Morocco and Mauritius). Finally, 6% of the participants were from the Americas (Mexico and Jamaica).
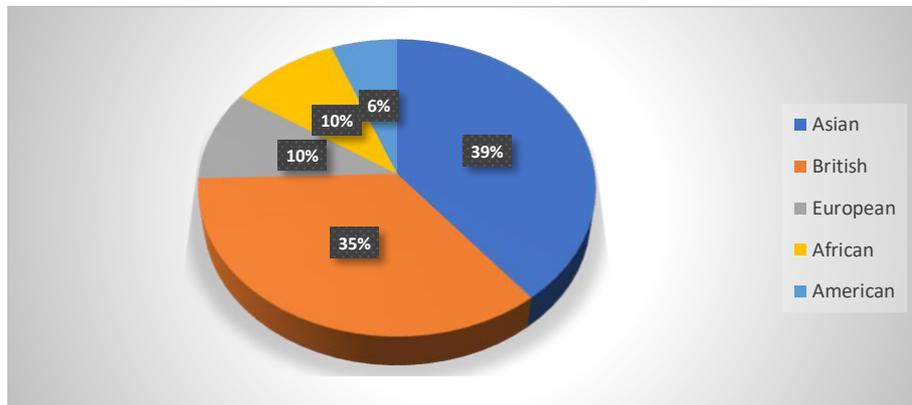
Figure 3-1 Consumers participants' origin

3.4.4.2 Profile of hospitality firms

Approximately 30 emails were sent to request an interview were sent to hotels which were listed on TripAdvisor, but the response rate was not more than 10%. The recruitment was then continued by calling the hotels, asking to speak with the person replying to the TripAdvisor reviews. Finally, 12 participants were successfully recruited for the study. Table 3-4 show the profile of hospitality firms interviewed for the study, while Table 3-5 summarises the characteristics of the hospitality firms.

Table 3-4 Profile of the participants from hospitality firms

Hotel ID	Job Title	Length of experience	Source of the response
1	General Manager	18 years	General Manager
2	Operations manager	16 years	Operations manager
3	Marketing manager	Many years as a marketing officer, 7 years in the current hotel	Marketing manager as the owner
4	General Manager	18 months in the current hotel	General Manager
5	General Manager	5 years in the current hotel	Front office manager
6	General Manager	20 years	Front office manager
7	General Manager	15 years	General Manager
8	Guest relations officer	10 months	Guest relations manager
9	General Manager	12 years	General Manager
10	Owner	8 years	Owner
11	General Manager	30 years	General Manager
12	Business development manager	13 years in the current hotel	Business Development Manager as General Manager

Gender and job title.

According to Table 3-5, there were more male (75%) participants than female (25%) participants. Most of them were general managers (58.33%) while the rest were the owner, operations manager, marketing manager or guest relations officer (each comprised 8.33%).

Table 3-5 Characteristics of the participants from hospitality firms

Gender	%
Male	75.00%
Female	25.00%
Job title	
Owner	8.33%
General manager	58.33%
Operations manager	8.33%
Marketing manager	8.33%
Business development manager	8.33%
Guest relations officer	8.33%
Length of experience	
0-5 years	8.33%
5-10 years	8.33%
10-15 years	41.67%
15-20 years	25.00%
20-25 years	8.33%
25-30 years	8.33%

Length of experience in the hotel industry.

According to Table 3-4, most of the participants had adequate experience in the hotel industry with 10-15 years of experience (41.67%), 15-20 years (25%), up to 5 years (8.33%), 5-10 years (8.33%), 20-25 years (8.33%) and 25-30 years (8.33%). Therefore, it can be concluded that the participants knew exactly what they were talking about because they had been in the hospitality industry for quite a long time.

Hotel characteristics.

According to Table 3-6, the hotels in this study were variously rated at 2, 3 and 4-star, offering anywhere between 11 and 400 rooms. Most of them were chain hotels (58.3%), while the remaining (41.7%) were independent hotels. These numbers align with Kotler's

claim (1999) that the dominant entities in the hotel industry nowadays are the chain hotels (Yeung and Law, 2004). Almost all of the hotels had a restaurant(s) and bars, while some of them also offered spa and club facilities to complete their offering. With the exception of one economy chain hotel, all of the hotels accommodated meetings for businesses, with some also having conference facilities. Even though they had an entirely different offering, their primary target market was the same, which is the corporate guest. Therefore, most of their guests were corporate guests who visited during the week, while on the weekend, the majority of the guests were leisure guests. The ratios between corporate and leisure guests throughout the hotels were slightly different, ranging from 80:20 to 55:45. The complete details about the hotels' characteristics can be found in Table 3-6.

Table 3-6 Hotel Characteristics

Hotel ID	Type of hotel	Hotel's rating	No. of rooms	Facilities	Corporate: Leisure	Media monitored	Media replied	Software used
1	Chain	4-star	400	2 restaurant, a bar and lounge, a spa, 17 meeting rooms	55:45	TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Expedia and the IHG website	TripAdvisor and the IHG website, other platforms were responded by another colleague	BDRC
2	Chain	4-star	202	a brasserie and bar, 4 meeting rooms, a conference centre with a capacity up to 1000 people	70:30	TripAdvisor, Booking.com, laterooms.com	TripAdvisor	ReviewPro
3	Independent, boutique	4-star	30 rooms and 2 suites	a bar, a restaurant, a meeting room for up to 100 people, a private garden, a gym	n/a	TripAdvisor, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Google Review, Booking.com	TripAdvisor	data n/a
4	Chain, economy	2-star	142	a restaurant, a bar	70:30	TripAdvisor, Facebook	TripAdvisor	specific software
5	Chain	3-star	264	a restaurant, a bar, 10 meeting rooms	60:40	TripAdvisor, Booking.com	TripAdvisor	ReviewPro
6	Chain	4-star	42	a pub, a restaurant, meeting room for up to 22 pax, a gym	70:30	Booking.com, TripAdvisor, Google, Agoda, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn	TripAdvisor and Booking.com,	ReviewPro

7	Chain	4-star	120	a club and spa, 13 conference and meeting rooms, a restaurant, a bar and lounge	60:40	Booking.com, TripAdvisor, Hotels.com, Google, Facebook, Twitter	TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Hotels.com, Google, Facebook, Twitter	Trust You, Venue Verdict, Service Vision
8	Chain	4-star	178	2 restaurants, a bar, 12 meeting rooms	n/a	Expedia, Booking.com, TripAdvisor, Medalia (own media)	Expedia, Booking.com, TripAdvisor, Medalia (own media)	ReviewPro
9	Independent	3-star	43	a restaurant and bar, a leisure club, 2 meeting rooms	80:20	Booking.com, TripAdvisor, Google, Facebook	TripAdvisor and Booking.com,	data n/a
10	Independent	4-star	11	a restaurant, a meeting room for up to 200 people	n/a	TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Facebook, Google	TripAdvisor, Facebook	GuestLine, Restlinks
11	Independent, boutique	3-star	86	a lounge and bar, 4 conference and function rooms,	70:30	TripAdvisor, Booking.com	TripAdvisor, Booking.com	data n/a
12	Independent	3-star	71 rooms and 3 apartments	a spa, 6 acres of formal garden and 29 acres of parkland, 6 conference and meeting rooms, a dining room with bar, a health and fitness club	n/a	TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Expedia and Late Rooms	TripAdvisor	data n/a

3.4.5 Data analysis

As Miles and Huberman (1984) point out, qualitative data come in the form of words rather than numbers. The issue, then, is how to move from these words to data analysis (Silverman, 2013) to identify, examine, compare and interpret patterns and themes (Hair *et al.*, 2011). According to Srivastava and Hopwood (2009, p. 77), "the process of data analysis in a qualitative study is highly reflexive… because patterns, themes, and categories do not emerge on their own from the data… Instead, they are driven by what the inquirer wants to know and how the inquirer interprets what the data are telling her or him according to subscribed theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions, and intuitive field understandings". Waiting for the theory to emerge from the data is a common misconception in qualitative research (Goulding, 2005), especially by researchers adopting a grounded theory approach because they are expected to enter the field without any pre-conceived theory.

According to several qualitative research experts (e.g., Dey (1998), Denzin and Lincoln (1994), and Coffey and Atkinson (1996)), there is no single method of analysis in qualitative research (in Mehmetoglu and Altinay, 2006). Content analysis, grounded theory and narrative analysis are three ways of exploring qualitative data frequently proposed (Silverman, 2014). Additionally, there are also ethnography and phenomenology (Goulding, 2005) as well as visual analysis, discourse analysis, conversation analysis and argument analysis (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2015). These qualitative analytic methods can be divided into two camps: the ones stemming from a particular theoretical or epistemological position and those independent of theory and epistemology, and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

This study uses the thematic analysis method because it is flexible and "can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Further, this decision was also taken because as Braun and Clarke suggest, many researchers state that they subscribe to grounded theory, but they do not "necessarily appear to fully subscribe to the theoretical commitments of a 'full fat' grounded theory, which requires analysis to be directed towards theory development" (ibid, pp. 81). Sometimes it is simply employed to imply that the analyst has grounded his or her theory in the data, which makes it synonymous with an inductive approach (Bryman, 2016). Similarly, there are also researchers who claim that they are conducting thematic discourse analysis but fail to conduct discursive analyses (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, grounded theory, thematic discourse analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis are similar in that

they are all concerned with a search for themes or patterns across an entire data set, which overlaps with thematic analysis (ibid, pp. 80-1). Therefore, as a way to avoid these conditions, the thesis utilises thematic analysis.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method of analysis, often influenced by grounded theory (Bryman, 2016), which involves the search for repeated patterns of meaning across a data set (e.g., a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts). The application of thematic analysis has been widely accepted in tourism research, especially to the interpretation of written document such as interview transcripts (Walters, 2016). Since this thesis aims to provide a more detailed and rich account of different perspectives on online consumer reviews, using an inductive approach, a thematic approach is appropriate. This approach is similar to that of grounded theory in which the coding process does not use a pre-existing coding frame, but identifies or examines the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations from the data. The analysis process creates themes which can provide answers to the research question(s). One important note regarding the creation of themes is that it depends heavily on the researcher's judgment. There is "no hard-and-fast answer to the question of what proportion of your data set needs to display evidence of the theme for it to be considered a theme". The fact that a theme appears in more instances does not mean that it is more crucial than the ones that appear in fewer instances (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 82–6). The phases of conducting thematic analysis are outlined in Table 3-7 below.

Table 3-7 Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

(Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

A critical thing about thematic analysis highlighted in the article was that the researcher is not in a passive position in which he or she simply waits for the theme to 'emerge' or 'to be

discovered' (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009). Instead, the researcher plays an active role in identifying patterns/themes, selecting which are of interest and reporting them to the readers (ibid, 80). Having learnt the thematic analysis phases carefully, as mentioned in Table 3-7, the process of data analysis for this thesis was as follows:

First, *familiarisation with the data*. The data collection, transcription and development of initial codes were undertaken concurrently (Spiggle, 1994). The process of familiarisation emerged from the process of transcription. The transcription process for the thesis took longer than expected, mainly because of the difficulty faced by the researcher since English is not her first language. Sometimes, I had to play the recording several times to identify the correct word from the participant. However, this difficulty offered some benefit insofar as it has led me to become more familiar with the data. Additionally, by the process of transcription, the researcher can also develop a more thorough understanding of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Three examples of transcript from each group of participants are available in appendix I, J and K.

Second, *generating initial codes*. This phase involves "the process of classifying and labelling units of data" (Spiggle, 1994, p. 493) and a means of identifying themes in the data (Bryman, 2016). For more convenient storing and organising of the data, all transcripts (i.e., the data) were stored in Nvivo. However, the process of categorising and generating initial codes happened even before that. It started when the researcher transcribed the interviews, as suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003), or even as the interview commenced (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). Throughout the interview and transcription process, I noted down interesting topics or potential codes or themes on the research memo. Some of the notes acted as a starting point in the coding process which was done employing Nvivo software. Initially, 55 codes were created, under three broad categories (i.e., reviewers, hospitality firms and potential guests), guided by the literature about consumer behaviour as well as online consumer reviews and hospitality firms' interventions. I conducted an iteration process several times during this second stage of generating initial codes. An iteration process is a reflexive process and "a key to sparking insight and developing meaning" (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009, p. 77). The process stopped after I realised that the codes produced were similar to those generated by previous coding activity. Differences only occurred in the terms that were used, but they referred to similar concepts.

Therefore, I decided to continue the analysis process to the next phase. From the final iteration process, 60 codes were created under three larger categories (i.e., reviews, response and customer satisfaction). Further, 11 subcategories were created under these three general ones. This process continued several times. From this process, not all codes

were used in the analysis. Codes and categories which were relevant to the research questions and research aims were selected. The project map of this thesis, as the result of the final iteration process, can be seen in Figure 3-2.

Third, *searching for themes*. This stage *"involves sorting the different codes into potential themes, and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes. Essentially, you are starting to analyse your codes and consider how different codes may combine to form an overarching theme"* (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 89). Since themes are abstract constructs (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) that link expressions found in the text, the process of exploration for appropriate themes was protracted. This difficulty especially arose due to a determined desire for a data-driven, inductive approach, rather than rely on a priori theoretical understandings of the phenomenon under study (ibid). Eventually, the project map produced in Nvivo (Figure 3-2) was generated, and themes in the data were identified by exploring similarities and differences (Spiggle, 1994). However, Ryan and Bernard (2003) recommend to also search for repetition, indigenous typologies or categories, metaphors and analogies, transitions, linguistic connectors, missing data and theory-related material in an effort to search for themes. Finally, after some grouping of codes to form main themes while also assigning some others to form sub-themes and discarding unrelated ones, I created initial themes as pictured in Figure 3-3.

Fourth, *reviewing themes*. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 91), during this phase, it will become evident that some candidate themes are not really themes (e.g., if there are not enough data to support them, or the data are too diverse), while others might collapse into each other (e.g., two apparently separate themes might form one theme). Other themes might need to be broken down into separate themes. This phase involves two levels of reviewing and refining the themes, one at the level of the coded data extracts and the other concerning the entire data set. At this level, the researcher should consider whether the candidate thematic map 'accurately' reflects the meanings evident in the data set as a whole. In other words, it should be possible to create 'higher level' themes which reflect a group of codes formulated to answer the research question(s). Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggest conducting meta coding, which examines the relationship among a priori themes to discover potentially new themes and overarching meta themes.
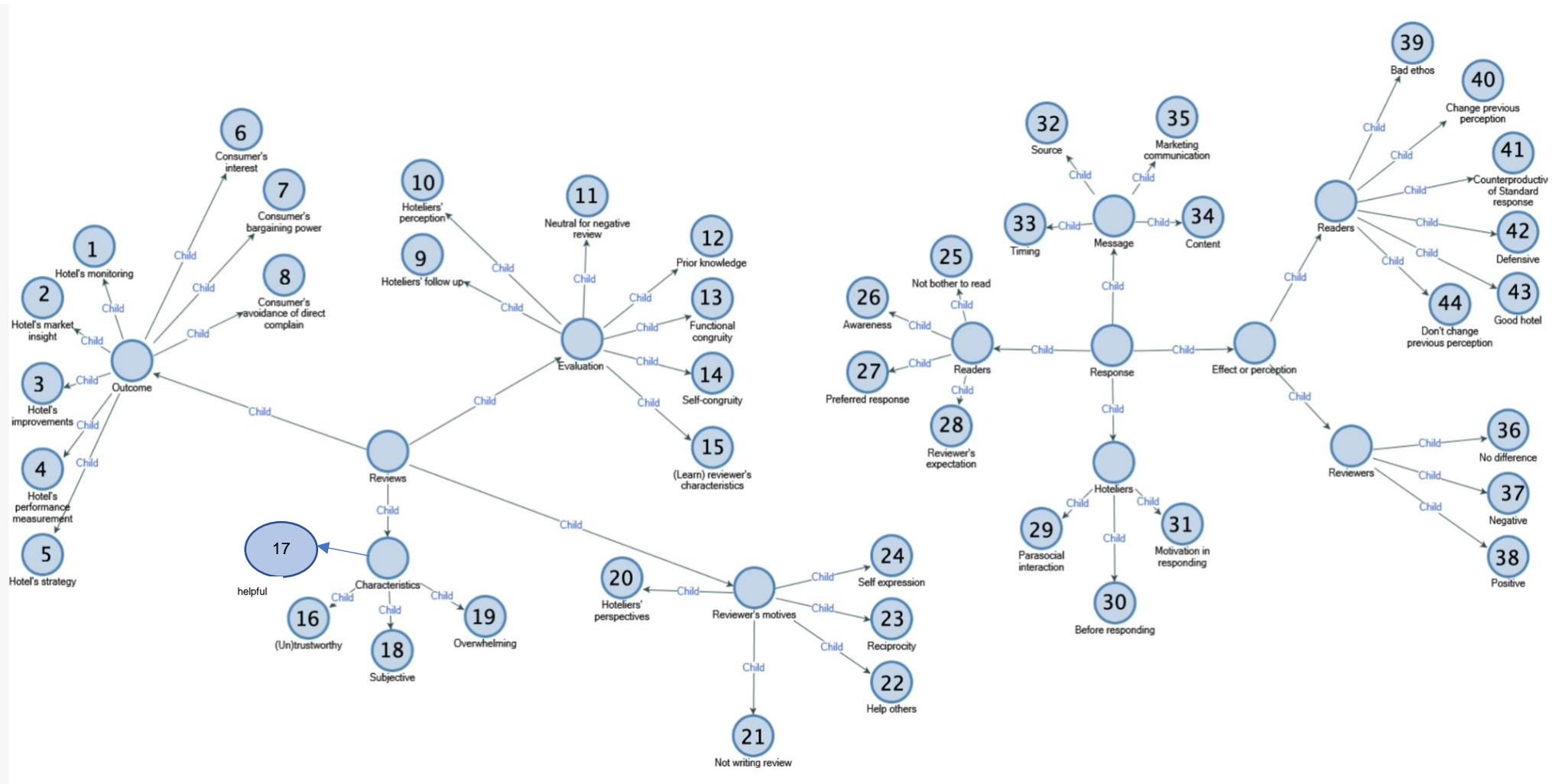
Figure 3-2 Project Map
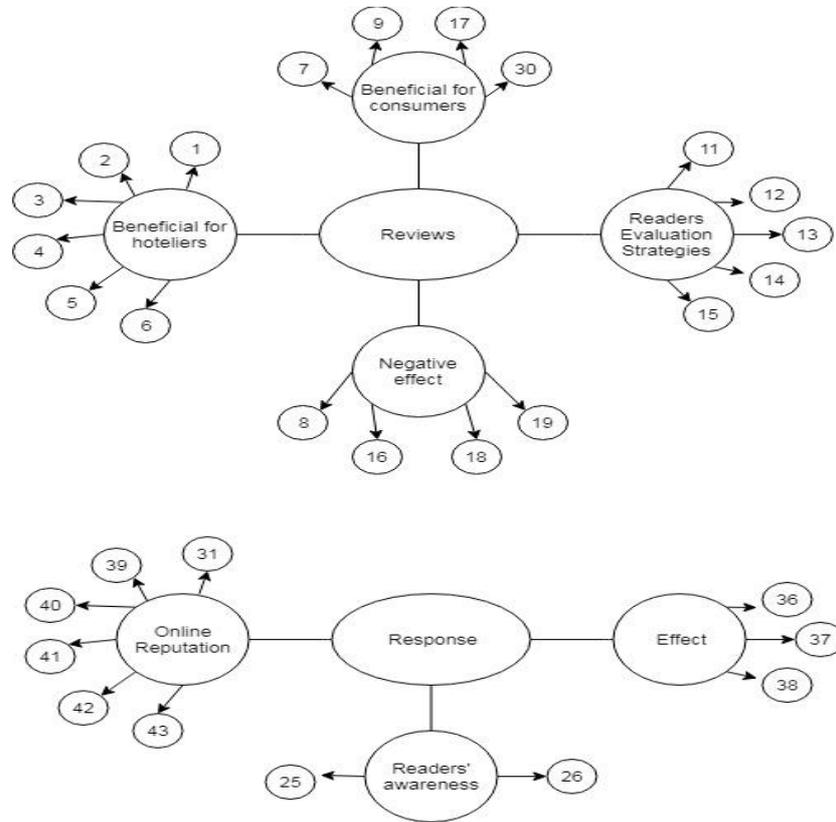
Figure 3-3 Initial themes

Fifth, *defining and naming themes*. After successfully creating two main themes under the previous phase (pictured in Figure 3-4), the next phase is to define and name them. The themes were essentially created to answer the research questions posed in chapter 1. Therefore, after analysing and observing the data coded in the earlier process, followed by conducting the meta coding, the relationships among the themes can be identified as well as overarching themes that interact with each other. This process led to two main themes being developed. The first one accommodates the many aspects of online consumer reviews which contradict with each other. Therefore, the name 'paradoxes of reviews' is found to be suitable for it. The second theme accommodates similar aspects regarding hospitality firms' responses, thus the name 'paradoxes of response'. There are several sub-themes under each theme which offer suggestions and explanations for research questions.
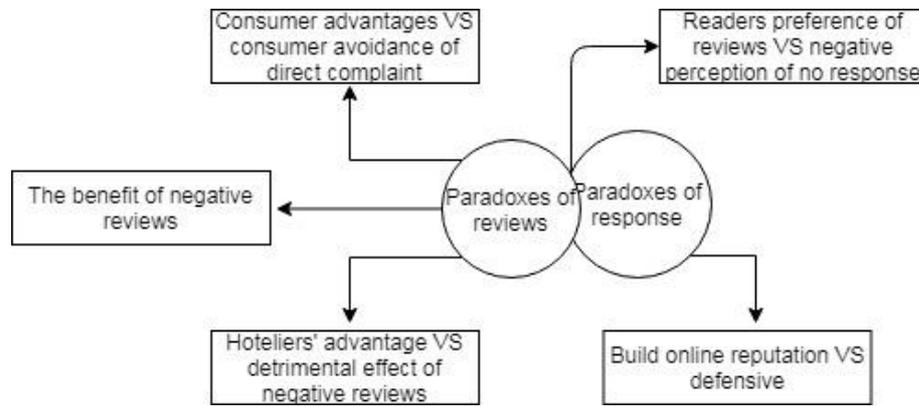
Figure 3-4 The thematic mind map

Sixth, *producing the report*. After successfully creating the final thematic map, the researcher can start creating the report. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest going back to collated data extracts for each theme and organising them into a coherent and internally consistent account, with an accompanying narrative. This is also called the process of "cutting and sorting, which involves identifying quotes or expressions that seem somehow important and then arranging the quotes/expressions into piles of things that go together" (Ryan and Bernard, 2003, p. 94). The findings and analysis chapters were written after the thematic mind map was finalised, presenting a selection of excerpts collated together to provide answers to the research questions under investigation.

3.4.5.1 Coding the data

To conduct the above steps of thematic analysis, the research began with open coding of the data in NVivo. During this step, the identification of "quotes or expressions that seem important" are "arranged into piles of things that go together" (Ryan and Bernard, 2003, p. 94). These piles of things are called codes or nodes in NVivo (see Table 3-8, column 1). Some extracts were coded more than once where they fitted with other codes. Appendix H provides an example NVivo coding summary for the code "don't complain directly but write a review"; see Table 3-8, column 1, row 2 for the code's placement in the overall coding process. These initial codes then went through several iteration processes during the second stage of generating initial codes. Only codes that formed a theme worthy for analysis that continues to be included in the coding process. Some themes were not included in the analysis for several reasons: there are not enough data to support them, or the data are too diverse (Braun and Clarke, 2006), or simply would not able to answer any of the research questions.

Table 3-8 Coding process for "second paradox"

First round of open coding (Codes)	Second round of open coding (Categories)	Abstraction (Higher order categories)	Title of themes (Core categories)
"don't come to the reception"	Consumer's avoidance of direct contact	Negative side of consumer reviews	Second paradox: reviews benefit consumers but also cause consumers to become less active in making direct complaints
"don't complain directly but write a review"			
"consumer review is the best platform to complain"			
"can be fabricated"	Untrustworthy		
"paid review"			
"not the complete truth"			
"personal opinion"	Subjective		
"different expectation/standard"			
"many contrasting reviews"	Overwhelming		
"constantly learning from guest feedback"	Better service quality	Consumer benefits	
"a tool for improvement"			
"investigate as to why did that happen and how we can improve"			
"drill into the area that needs work"			
"identifying the opportunity for us to either improve or to change"			
"give you a general idea of what to expect"	Consumer bargaining power: more informed		
"it clarifies a lot of decisions that I'm going to make"			
"I already know what could likely disappoint me"			
"you can get out more information"			

To demonstrate, the following excerpt from a general manager provides an example of how one extract was coded twice (i.e., under "don't come to the reception" and "don't complain directly but write a review", Table 3-8 column 1 rows 2 and 3):

> We definitely had a couple of instances where people are still staying in the hotel and rather than speak to myself or the duty manager when they have an issue; they'll be in their bedroom, typing on TripAdvisor because their heating is not working or they don't have their room service yet (H7, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

The participant provided an example where some guests decided not to approach the hotel's staff (e.g., "don't come to the reception") to speak or report a problem (i.e., complain) when they experienced a problem in the hotel. However, these guests wrote a review on TripAdvisor ("don't complain directly but write a review").

Following this first step of the coding process, the second stage of coding was conducted. This stage consists of categorisation of data, which is the process of "classifying or labelling units of data" by grouping them together in the same phenomenon (Spiggle, 1994, p. 493) (see Table 3-8 column 2). I then conducted a process of "abstraction", which "groups previously identified categories into more general, conceptual classes" (ibid) (Table 3-8 column 3). Table 3-9 provides a sample of the data analysis process from interviews with reviewers and potential guests to show how codes from the first round of open coding (e.g., "don't come to the reception", "don't complain directly but write a review", and "consumer

review is the best platform to complain") evolved into a category (e.g., "consumer's avoidance of direct contact"); and how these categories (e.g., "consumer's avoidance of direct contact", "untrustworthy", "subjective", and "overwhelming") combined to establish a higher-order category (e.g., negative side of consumer reviews). Furthermore, as described on the fifth step of the thematic analysis described on section 3.4.5, these higher-order categories then combined to form a set of "core" categories such as "second paradox: reviews benefit consumers but also cause consumers to become less active in making direct complaints" (see Table 3-8 column 4).

Table 3-9 Open coding and abstraction

First round of open coding	Second round of open coding	Abstraction
(Codes)	**(Categories)**	**(Higher order categories)**
Don't come to the reception: "People don't come to the reception and say I've got this issue, they put it on TripAdvisor afterwards". *(H3, marketing manager, 4-star independent boutique hotel).* "I doubt that I have contacted the hotel". *(R1, female, 29, single, PhD student)* **Don't complain directly but write a review:** "A lot of the time the guest just choose to go home and write a review instead of speaking to us at the hotel or during the stay. Sometimes you get people who have been with us for a week and not mentioned a single thing and then they go around and write the review". *(H9, general manager, 3-star independent hotel).* "If I went back to the reception and complained, he would not be really happy, so I just put on my laptop and just complained". *(R26, female, 35, married with children, PhD student).* **Consumer review is the best platform to complain:** "We do encourage them to talk to us directly but that just doesn't always happen. People don't always do it. I think they quite like the anonymity". *(H3, marketing manager, 4-star independent boutique hotel).* "I feel that this is the right platform to communicate with the hotel". *(R15, female, 30, married, PhD student)*	Consumer's avoidance of direct contact	Negative side of consumer reviews
Can be fabricated: "We've had people leave a review and we don't think they even stayed here, and people can leave malicious, competitors could leave malicious reviews but they don't have to prove to trip advisor they've stayed here, you're free to, anybody could leave a review on a hotel, on trip advisor on any body's business entry if they want to do something malicious, we can't prevent that". *(H12, business development manager, 4-star independent hotel).* "Not all the reviews are also honest. Maybe there are people who fight for competition on there". *(R48, female, 40s, university staff).* "I don't know if it's my own perception, but I think that maybe, you know, people can request other people to volunteer and just write some good reviews on a friendship…" *(PG29, male, 40s, single, PhD student).* **Paid review:** "I'm assuming that somehow people must incentivise people to write good reviews, whether it's directly employing them or incentivising them in some other way, but I've, and I've sometimes thought about I wonder whether I'm reading a genuine review or not, but it sounds genuine". *(PG25, female, 38, married with children, doctor).* "They're very subjective a lot of times, especially now, people are paid to write reviews so it's easier to get away with stuff like that". *(R36, female, 27, single, PhD student)* **Not the complete truth:** "They didn't say the complete truth, maybe that's it when you don't tell a lie but you don't tell the complete, the whole truth". *(PG3, female, 39, single mother with a child)*	Untrustworthy	
Personal opinion: "One customer might really like that because it makes them feel they're in the countryside and it's something that they'll tell people about and maybe they're a good sleeper anyway, so it's not disturbed them. But then the customer in the next room to them, might be livid, might be furious. How dare you have this horrible noisy creature disturbing my night's sleep". *(H10, the owner of a 4-star country house hotel).* "Different people have different views. Some may like this, but someone may not". *(PG37, male, 27, single, PhD student)* "Whatever people are saying in their reviews is not gospel, it's not facts and it's not objective and it's not you know, some people might just get angry and might be unreasonable, might have you know, there's so many reasons why people might give negative reviews you know, so you've got to take it with a pinch of salt as the English say, you've got to be careful when you look at these things because you don't know how loaded it is, what motivated the person to provide such a negative". *(R42, female, 47, married with children, university staff).* **Different expectation/standard:** "I can't fully trust because the person who's writing the review might have a different expectation than mine so that they might become unsatisfied when I can be just fine with the same experience". *(PG13, female, 24, single, master student).* "It's also you're asking yourself what expectations did these people have, maybe they went there hoping that they were going to find I don't know, a 5 star pool, what are my expectations, what would I be happy with, do you see what I mean?" *(R42, female, 47, married with children, university staff).*	Subjective	
Many contrasting reviews: "And it's confusing, okay, which one…? How do you choose, because there will be many positives and a few negatives and then it's quite confusing as to what do you choose?" *(PG29, male, 40s, single, PhD student).*	Overwhelming	

Please note that not all group of participants (e.g., reviewer – denoted by R, potential guest – PG and hoteliers – H) are represented on all codes. However, whenever available, the researcher has tried to present all groups' perspectives. The following section demontrates the validity procedures utilised by the study to ensure the quality of the thesis.

3.5   Ensuring the quality of the research

Without rigour, research is worthless; it becomes fiction and loses its utility. Hence, "a great deal of attention is applied to reliability and validity in all research method" (Morse *et al*., 2017, p. 14). Rigour relates to the integrity and competence of the research, and also to its ethics and politics (Tobin and Begley, 2004). For qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln substituted reliability and validity with the parallel concept of trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Furthermore, they propose trustworthiness as containing four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, while authenticity consists of fairness, ontological authentication, educative authentication, catalytic authentication and tactical authenticity (ibid). These concepts are still being challenged by many qualitative researchers, and they are still in pursuit of suitable criteria for ensuring rigour, resulting in a plethora of terms and criteria (Morse *et al*., 2017): for example, authenticity, plausibility and criticality (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993) or triangulation (Tobin and Begley, 2004). Meanwhile, Creswell and Miller (2000) argue that the choice of this procedure has to be administered by two perspectives: the lens researchers choose to validate their studies and the researchers' paradigm assumptions. The two-dimensional framework that can help researchers select procedures based on who assesses the credibility of a study and their own philosophical assumptions towards qualitative inquiry is presented in Table 3-10.

Paradigm assumption/Lens	Postpositivist or Systematic Paradigm	Constructivist Paradigm	Critical Paradigm
Lens of the Researcher	Triangulation	Disconfirming evidence	Researcher reflexivity
Lens of Study Participants	Member checking	Prolonged engagement in the field	Collaboration
Lens of People External to the Study (Reviewers, Readers)	The audit trail	Thick, rich description	Peer debriefing

Table 3-10 Validity procedures within a qualitative lens and paradigm assumptions (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 126)

Please note that the term validity used in this framework refers to Schwandt's (1997) description as "how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them" (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 124). The researcher found this framework helpful in determining what procedures were to be conducted in order to ensure the quality of the research, amongst the plethora of other categories or concepts in the literature. Since I subscribe to constructivist paradigm (see section 3.2) and want to capture the validity from the lens of the researcher, the study participants as well as the readers, the thesis employs disconfirming evidence, prolonged engagement in the field and provides thick, rich description to ensure its validity and credibility.

Disconfirming evidence is "the process where investigators first establish the preliminary themes or categories in a study and then search through the data for evidence that is consistent with or disconfirms these themes" (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 127). As discussed in the previous section, I established preliminary codes, categories or themes during the transcription process. The process had already started, even as I conducted the interview. After finding these initial codes, I continued the process by looking at the data to find more instances and excerpts that could be grouped under the same codes. Having said that, it is true that finding extracts consistent with the codes was easier than finding the ones which disconfirmed them. However, I continued this process which enabled me to see the contradictions between the codes, which then becomes the thesis' themes. This practice exhibits the true nature of reality in constructivists' point of view, which is multiple and complex.

Prolonged engagement in the field is a validity procedure which requires the researcher to stay at the research site for a prolonged period of time to compare their interview data and observational data (Creswell and Miller, 2000). In this case, Creswell was referring to an

ethnographic study which requires the researcher to perform multiple observations and to conduct that successfully, the researcher needs to build trust with the gatekeeper and the participants. As the thesis is not an ethnographic study, and the data collection only involved one semi-structured interview with each of the participants, prolonged engagement in the field was not needed. However, during the interviews, I tried my best not to limit participants' explanations. Interrupting participants when they were explaining something was avoided. Therefore, the interviews varied in length from half an hour to more than two hours. Moreover, comparison of the interview data with the literature, as well as with the knowledge obtained from observing the online consumer review websites, was still performed. By doing this, I tried to capture the multiple perspectives from participants, and a better understanding of the context of participants' views was obtained (ibid).

A thick, rich description is one of the procedures to establish the validity of the study by "describing the setting, the participants, and the themes of a qualitative study in rich detail to help the reader to understand that the account is credible" (ibid, 128). The accounts about the themes, as well as about the participants and the setting of the research, are provided in rich detail in chapters 4 and 5.

Finally, as Lincoln (1995) suggests, many of the proposed and emerging standards for quality in interpretive social science are also standards for ethics. Therefore, the following section outlines the ethical issues in this research.

3.6   Ethical issues in the research

As we undertake research, we are representing ourselves and the institution on the broader community. Therefore, we must adopt the highest ethical standards whenever we conduct research (Quinlan, 2011). Ethical issues arise at a variety of stages in social research (Bryman, 2016). Ethical considerations revolve around such issues as how to treat research participants, the restriction on the researcher and participants' engagement, or how to select the participant (Wilson, 2014; Bryman, 2016). Thus, research ethics can be defined as the application of moral principles "in planning, conduction, and reposting the results of research studies" (Myers, 2013). Furthermore, key principles in research ethics consist of ensuring that no harm comes to participants, respecting the dignity of research participants, ensuring fully informed consent from research participants, protecting the privacy of research participants, ensuring the confidentiality of research data, protecting the anonymity of individuals or organisations, avoiding deception about the nature or aims of the research, declaration of affiliations, funding sources and conflict of interest, honesty and transparency

in communicating about the research and avoidance of any misleading or false reporting of research findings (Christians, 2000; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2015).

According to the Nottingham University's policy, there must be "ethical review (and approval) where the research involves the participation of human participants, their data and/or their tissue" (*Code of Research Conduct and research ethics of University of Nottingham.*, no date, p. 13). Since the thesis involves human participants, an ethical review had to be completed before the researcher conducted the study. I submitted the ethics form to the School's ethics committee, and soon after received a favourable ethical opinion on 30th January 2017. The only concern raised by the ethics officer was about the problem that might arise if the thesis was to use excerpts from online consumer review websites. However, since the thesis only uses participants' interviews as the data, this concern was soon eliminated.

The research has been conducted with significant consideration for ethical practice. At the beginning of the interview, every participant was informed about the title of the project; the person conducted the project; the nature of the study; their expected participation and the type of information that they are going to be asked; as well as the treatment to their data. I offered anonymity to the participants and also explained that their demographic data might be used for analysis. Additionally, I also explained that pseudonyms are used throughout the study. I also informed interviewees that their participation in the interview is voluntary and they may decide to stop the interview at any point without giving reasons. They can also decide not to answer any individual questions during the interview. Participants were asked to provide their verbal consent afterwards. The interviews were recorded, and the data was stored in a personal computer and could only be accessed by the researcher and her supervisors.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided details about the philosophical orientation adopted, along with the justification for the qualitative methodology chosen for this study. Since I believe that reality is socially constructed, semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture participants' perceptions about online consumer reviews and hospitality firms' interventions. To provide a more thorough understanding of the issues, the research adopted a holistic approach, involving multiple actor perspectives. A purposive, convenience sampling followed by snowball sampling approach was adopted, whereby 12 hospitality firms, 31 reviewers and 21 potential guests were successfully interviewed. Data from the interviews were stored and organised on NVivo. Even though the initial coding was conducted using the software, the

data analysis was performed manually using the thematic analysis framework from Braun and Clarke (2006). The process of thematic analysis, as well as the final thematic mind map followed by the coding process, were presented in this chapter. Finally, the chapter concluded with a discussion on quality management and research ethics issues of the research. The next chapter elaborates the findings and analysis related to the consumer reviews and firms' interventions.

Chapter 4.   Findings and Analysis: Online Consumer Reviews and Hospitality Firms' Interventions from Three Perspectives

4.1   Overview of the chapter

In order to explore the interplay between online consumer reviews and companies' interventions from the perspectives of reviewers, potential guests and hospitality firms, the data analysis is divided into two chapters. This chapter serves to present the findings and concentrates on the three actors' perspectives on consumer reviews and firms' interventions to answer the first, second and third research questions. The following chapter then discusses the paradoxes perceived by the three actors, which answers the last research question.

The chapter is composed of two parts. The first part is a discussion of the three actors' perspectives on consumer reviews. First, it explores the findings about a review's benefits for reviewers and potential guests (i.e., consumers) (section 4.2.1), and second it continues with a discussion about the benefits of reviews for companies (section 4.2.2). Third, a discussion of the negative effects of consumer reviews (section 4.2.3) follows. Fourth, the strategies used by reviewers and potential guests when reading numerous reviews about accommodation are examined (section 4.2.4). The chapter ends with a discussion about the strategies adopted by the hospitality firms when they evaluate the reviews (sub-section 4.2.5).

The second part of the chapter discusses the elaboration of the three actors' perspectives on firms' interventions and begins with a discussion about the importance of responding to consumer reviews (section 4.3.1). This is followed by an examination of the practice participants use to respond to reviews (section 4.3.2). Finally, reviewers and potential guests' points of view are explored to shed light on the effect of firms' interventions (section 4.3.3), as well as to learn about their awareness of the firms' interventions (section 4.3.4). The conclusion highlights some of the study's contributions to the literature, featuring a figure which summarises the main findings of this chapter.

4.2   The role of consumer reviews in tourism and hospitality services

4.2.1   Benefit for reviewers and potential guests

As summarised by Gursoy, Del Chiappa, & Zhang (2017), online consumer reviews "have enabled consumers to become more sophisticated information seekers and information generators" (as cited in Gursoy, 2019, p. 53). Consumers can access more information more easily, as well as provide information more easily to a potentially large audience. Hospitality

firms are very much aware of this phenomenon and have pushed themselves harder to provide better quality of service for customers. Failing to provide good service quality could result in poor reviews, which affect their rating on the review platforms. Please note that the term 'consumers' used widely in this thesis may generally mean reviewers and/or potential guests because reviewers may also act as potential guests which consume the services. These benefits for reviewers and potential guests are discussed in the following sections.

4.2.1.1 Increased bargaining power: being more informed

Online consumer reviews have become an important information source for consumers who want to choose products or services that are best suited to them (Browning, So and Sparks, 2013). A potential guest can read reviews in order to establish a holistic understanding of the accommodation, something which was not possible prior to online communications. Consistent with the findings of previous research, the study found that all participants mentioned this in the interviews, highlighting the fact that they gain a lot of benefit from reading and using online reviews:

> *I think reviews are good. I think they provide more rights to consumers, more choices, more options, more information (PG47, male, 49, married, university staff).*

> *Through the reviews I've been able to go into, I've been able to choose cheaper accommodation with open eyes rather than just reading the advert on the hotel website that probably tries to hide the bad bits (PG25, female, 38, married, doctor).*

> *Usually customer reviews, they usually tell you an idea of what to expect, without the review you don't know until you go there and try it (PG52, female, 35, married with children, stay at home mum).*

The excerpts reiterate the findings from previous studies that online consumer reviews allow potential guests to gain easy access to valuable information which influences their decision-making processes and purchasing intentions (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Davis and Agrawal, 2018), especially in the evaluation and selection stages between several alternatives (O'Connor, 2010a). According to almost all participants, they obtain information that they need from the reviews, which would not be possible otherwise. Reviews have enabled greater bargaining power because consumers are becoming more aware of various options by reading the reviews. Before reviews available, they did not have the tool to assess firms' claims and eventually surrendered to the firms' information. Their bargaining power has increased because they do not have to depend to the marketer anymore. Nowadays, consumers can get credible information easily to make a better decision.

Since consumer reviews were written by real customers who have experienced the service about their own experience (Casaló *et al.*, 2015b; Geetha, Singha and Sinha, 2017), they provide other consumers with substantial information about the real level of service quality to be expected. By reading the reviews, potential customers are able to gather more information about the accommodation and form expectations about it (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Filieri and McLeay, 2014). Furthermore, consumers also read online reviews to validate their existing perceptions about their preferred accommodation (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013). Therefore, participants are better prepared, and the chance of a satisfactory stay becomes greater. In the following accounts it is clear that reading consumer reviews has helped them in this regard:

> *Form an impression of the place, of the property to see whether it fits in your expectation or not; you get the rough idea I think (PG35, female, 24, single, PhD student).*

> *I think because I have read the reviews, I am not disappointed, because I already know what could likely disappoint me so I kind of had a buffer, so I wasn't disappointed – it was okay (PG24, female, 31, single, PhD student).*

The above excerpts offer a number of examples of how participants made an evaluation of the accommodation (to be discussed later in this chapter) and based their decision on that evaluation. From the reviews, these participants learned that the accommodation was not flawless. Since they were able to manage their expectations, they were still satisfied. This situation corresponds with Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1988) who stated that satisfaction is an evaluation from the consumer after comparing the level of service that they have received with their expectation. Therefore, online reviews enable consumers to manage their expectations and the reviews mean that there is a closer match to actual service quality delivery. This is something that hotel managers can take away from this research; satisfaction can be achieved when expectations are managed. Since consumers use reviews when they are evaluating their satisfaction, hotel managers should carefully manage reviews about their hotel. One way to do that is to provide a response to it.

In conclusion, the immediate effect of reviews on consumers is a strengthening of their bargaining power through obtaining a greater depth of information about "unobservable product quality" (Mayzlin, Dover and Chevalier, 2014, p. 2421), such as level of cleanliness or sense of hospitality provided, enabling consumers to choose the best possible option available in the market. This corresponds to the literature claiming that online reviews have allowed consumers to gain easy access to valuable information which influences consumers'

decision-making processes and purchasing intentions (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Davis and Agrawal, 2018). In other words, in terms of finding information about a service, consumers do not have to depend on the service marketer anymore. Additionally, most participants agreed that they read reviews to gather more information about the accommodation, to form their expectations, and to minimise the gap between their expectations and delivered service quality. This finding complements existing literature which states that the main motivation for reading reviews is to make better buying decisions (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2003).

4.2.1.2 Better service quality

Another benefit which emerged from online reviews was hospitality firms' awareness of the impact they had upon consumers decision-making processes and purchase intentions (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). Moreover, firms were also very aware that reviews have an impact on their hotel's reputation and performance (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Mkono and Tribe, 2016; Viglia, Minazzi and Buhalis, 2016). Therefore, firms expend a great deal of energy and resources on monitoring review activity.

Monitoring reviews requires taking notes of the comments made about the hotel in reviews. Hence, firms are able to adjust their service procedures and delivery to be more in line with what customers identify in the reviews, which provides a good resource for developing service quality. By undertaking this initiative, companies are able to minimise the gap between consumers' expectations about the service and hotelier's perception about consumers' perceptions. Consequently, hospitality firms become able to deliver service which is more similar to their consumers' expectations. This results in greater customer satisfaction (further explanation about this topic is provided in more detail in section 6.3.1).

This condition is prevalent as almost all participants from the business respondents claimed that they would investigate the complaint and make some improvements to the service, when necessary, as stated below:

> *If you get a complaint in the hospitality industry, you should always investigate. And we always did you know; all complaint emails went to Mr X and he would look at them. All complaint letters, he would get involved in them and you know, but then he would rely on the staff here to investigate and tell him what happened. And if he didn't think that it's a fair thing, he would've replied to them. Or he would assign the restaurant manager to reply to them, and if it was fair, the same again (H3, marketing manager, 4-star independent boutique hotel).*

The above participant stressed that she would investigate every complaint received, even before online consumer reviews existed. However, the pressure to be proactive and have a better service recovery program became more prevalent after the emergence of online reviews. Since reviews are very powerful and have a big impact on consumer decision making, most participants from the hotel group stated that negative reviews should be prevented. As a consequence, hotels have become more and more active in improving their service quality.

Almost all participants from hospitality firms claimed that they use software to monitor consumer review websites (the complete information is available in section 3.4.4.2). This software provides them with reviews that they receive as well as live information about their hotel's performance. These participants monitor their hotel's daily performance and make adjustments and improvements to their service accordingly. One participant gave an example of such activity:

> We scan the internet for reviews, we've got a software to assist us with that. So if there is a problem review popping out, it will be flagged to us and we'll deal with it. But so as well as the positive feedback (H4, general manager, 2-star chain hotel).

Monitoring of reviews and the resulting service improvements have benefited the consumer greatly, as confirmed by one reviewer:

> It's kept everyone on the game to make sure that they aim for the high standards because they know that one bad review on TripAdvisor and it can really drag you down (R40, male, 30s, married, PhD student).

The above reviewer underscored the benefit of online reviews both for himself and for consumers in general. Service recovery, as well as service quality initiatives, have been conducted to ensure hotels are equipped to give their consumers the best possible service:

> Everything the guest says is listened to and although you might necessarily see the action that we've taken that has been some kind of a background to it, we have addressed it within the hotel. It just might not be visible to everyone else. Yes, I think that's really important to address anything that the guest said and recognise people for their good work (H8, guest relation officer, 4-star chain hotel).

These timely initiatives, as mentioned in the above excerpt, are needed in order to stimulate positive assessment from consumers about hospitality firms' service quality (Browning, So and Sparks, 2013). In conclusion, the other benefit for consumers as a result of online reviews is an improvement in service quality because of companies' attention to review

activity. Since most hotels participating in this study claimed that they monitor reviews to make improvements to their service, there is clear evidence of this benefit. This finding is consistent with previous studies which have argued that online reputation has become a major concern among hospitality and service management, resulting in product improvement (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018).

4.2.2 Benefits for firms

Online consumer reviews contain previous customers' evaluations of a product, a service, a brand or a person (Filieri, 2015). They are used by many consumers to learn about the product that they are going to buy (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008; Filieri and McLeay, 2014). Therefore, they are a good source of information for firms to form an understanding of future consumers' expectations. This information will then shape firms' strategies to gain a competitive advantage (Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019). Consumer reviews can therefore be seen as an important source of market information through which hotels can improve their service and secure their competitive advantage (Ye, Law, Gu, and Chen, 2011; Zhang, Ye, Law, and Li, 2010). The following is an example from a business participant who expressed the benefit of consumer reviews, highlighting the fact that reviews are able to give service marketers a fresh perspective:

> *Having guest feedback brings it to our attention because they come from.... working in a hotel, is very tunnel vision, you only see what you want to see, whereas someone coming from outside, they're coming in with a whole different perspective and they will see things that you don't necessarily see. And that's really important (H8, guest relation officer, 4-star chain hotel).*

Most research about consumer reviews from the hospitality firms' perspectives is more interested in how companies respond to reviews and the effects of that response on consumers (Tripp and Grégoire, 2011; van Noort and Willemsen, 2011; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013; Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015; Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015; Sparks, So and Bradley, 2016). There is limited research, if any, which explores how businesses evaluate reviews to improve their service delivery.

This section illustrates how consumer reviews can have some benefit for hospitality firms. The benefit consists of providing firms with information from the market, which leads to firms' improvements, monitor their performance, and develop their strategy. These behaviours then improve their service quality level. The last part of this section is about how consumer reviews are able to spark consumers' interest in accommodation which of course benefits hospitality firms.

As mentioned before, consumer reviews can be considered a valuable and accessible source of market information. Before their presence, one hotel participant in the study admitted that she ended up setting the standard as high as possible to satisfy guests, as expressed below:

> *You just don't know. But you set yourself, say for example, on Saturdays our rates are higher than normal days. So a double room on a Saturday could cost £195 for room only, we are setting ourselves to a market that has a high expectation, if you spend £200 for one bedroom for one night, it better be perfect. We just need to make sure that whatever is presented to the guest, we hope that we deliver on their expectation. We don't know what their expectations are until they walk through the door and they start talking to us, but we always think that it's always a high expectation (H6, general manager, 4-star chain boutique hotel).*

Setting high standards is good practice. However, it does not solve the problem of finding out consumers' everyday processes which are essential in creating the value-in-use by the firm (Grönroos, 2009). Information about this has to be obtained, and one way to do that is to hand out questionnaires to customers or sending employees to learn about what their customers have been saying about the hotel. However, most hotels participated in the study question the use of surveys since many guests only use them as a medium to make a complaint. On the other hand, word of mouth is not seen as credible because it cannot be verified. As a result, almost all participating hotels preferred to talk with their guests directly, to learn about their guests' experiences and expectations:

> *The only way you had to know what they thought about your hotel was either to talk to them or the old paper-based questionnaire. I think review sites have moved on a bit because when we ran the paper-based questionnaire and I'm probably going back 15 years to when I first became a GM, it was amazing. People used them as a way of complaining rather than actually saying anything, they actually used it as a way to complain. They ticked no, no, no, I didn't have a very good stay, put it in an envelope, give it to the receptionist on their way out. And I'm all for, as you probably guessed, it's interactive piece, I would rather be in control of asking the guest how was your stay, rather than opening an envelope and finding a really poor guest questionnaire and they then not left a name or address. Cause what can you do? You can't do anything about it. And that was why lots of hotels have actually stopped doing the paper-based questionnaire. Because people just using it as a way to complain (H1, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).*

From the above excerpt we can see that the general manager eventually chose a more interactive approach for obtaining customer feedback. Rather than distributing paper-based questionnaires, he chose to have a direct conversation. However, this manager can only meet a small number of guests, and even though most hotels have a logbook to record incidents, most of the face-to-face feedback was unrecorded. Therefore, almost all firms participating in the study claimed that they have been utilising consumer reviews to capture valuable information from their guests. In addition to serving as an influential source of information for other consumers, online reviews are also a powerful means of spreading information about consumer experiences of a product or service (Muralidharan *et al.*, 2017; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). In other words, online reviews represent consumers' perceptions of the service they have already experienced (Casaló *et al.*, 2015b; Geetha, Singha and Sinha, 2017). This corresponds with hospitality firms' participants belief that reviews reflect consumers' expectations of the service:

> *When a customer comes into a hotel, they come here with an expectation that this hotel is of a good standard. Based on what they've read on TripAdvisor, Booking.com, laterooms.com, so they have an expectation for us as a company to deliver a service that people have said we delivered (H2, operation manager, 4-star chain hotel).*

Reviews are therefore a highly valued source of information for firms to get to know their customers better, and to thereby improve the industry (Geetha, Singha and Sinha, 2017). By monitoring online reviews, businesses can gather information about past and current customer perceptions of the service as well as future customer's expectations. Monitoring consumers' expectations is important since online complaints were mostly made by reviewers whose expectation(s) were not being met (Vasquez, 2011). Additionally, some hotel participants stated that the information provided by the reviews is more credible than that from questionnaires, which justifies the effort of monitoring them:

> *I have worked in some hotels where they've had feedback forms, but often the information you get on those feedback forms is not of the quality that you get on TripAdvisor (H11, general manager, 3-star independent boutique hotel).*

According to some firms interviewed for the study, reviews are powerful because so many consumers read them. Their awareness of that prompted them to make an effort to ensure that their service is of the best quality, preventing negative word-of-mouth, and cultivating consumer interest.

4.2.2.1 Useful information for company improvements

The information provided in reviews comes from the narration of a customer's experience of the accommodation. Some reviewers reported that they wrote the review soon after they arrived at home, while some wrote it while they were still on the journey from the accommodation. Therefore, businesses can use online reviews to keep them educated about their consumers and the market, as mentioned by one participant below:

> As general manager, it's very easy for you to, to lose sight of what's going on. If I did a look at TripAdvisor - it comes through to my inbox all the time, but anyway, if I didn't, if I didn't look at it, you can perhaps lose grip of what's going on. I'm not a control freak or anything like that, but, but it's important, you know, to be close to your business, close to what's going on and that's why I chose to do it (H11, general manager, 3-star independent boutique hotel).

Most participants from hotel group who were interviewed for this study are general managers or higher-level managers who did not necessarily meet their customers on a daily basis. Reading online reviews has enabled them to have the same or even better information as they would get by meeting customers directly. These participants value the fact that information from reviews is current, meaning that they are still able to act on it. Some other examples of business participants' views about the importance of reviews as a means of keeping in touch with their customers are as follow:

> Every customer is different, everyone has a different expectation, but we are here to see what their expectation is and we can only figure that out is once they've come here and they stay and they go, they leave us some feedback (H2, operation manager, 4-star chain hotel).

> I just like to stay reasonably close to what my guests are saying about the hotel, that's all. And the fact that I physically got to log on to reply to them, means that I know every single day I am looking for live feedback (H1, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

The following extracts provide further insights into how reviews perceive and use reviews:

> Whenever you get any kind of complaint or we can see some kind of consistency of issue, we will look into it to get to know the reason why maybe we need to review our processes. You always want to improve and to review certain things. This building has been around for such a long time so there's always things that you want to improve (H5, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

> *if a review following something that went wrong means that we identified that there's something in our procedures which isn't right or didn't provide the requirement to satisfy that customer's needs if you wish, then we would re-write our procedures yes, and that happens all the time, it's inevitable (H12, business development manager, 4-star independent hotel).*

> *When I read the reviews, there's always a process to look at should I change the process in what we're doing or I will improve that. We had reviews about the cleanliness and we're thinking about getting more cleaner to do the job. So they are useful, but if they are given to us directly, that's better (H9, general manager, 3-star independent hotel).*

The above quotes provide some evidence that reviews are genuinely taken into consideration by the hotel participants and have encouraged them to revise their procedures or processes to provide better service to their customers. For example, the last quote gives a concrete example of how some reviews have triggered the general manager to increase the number of cleaners. However, as indicated in the last quote above, some participants also stressed their preference for direct feedback which is discussed later in this chapter.

4.2.2.2 Hotel's performance measurements

From the previous section, we learned that online consumer reviews could provide beneficial insights to hotels about their customers. Besides using the information to make improvements, the information can also be used to measure a hotel's performance. By making a comparison between the hotel's processes or procedures, and what their consumers have been saying about their experience with the process, hospitality firms can now compare their performance with real data. The excerpt below demonstrated how one business participant was able to use customer reviews as an input for measuring performance:

> *We are grateful as hospitality firms to be able to identify what we need to do, what we could do better, it's a great tool for praising the performance (H7, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).*

Monitoring reviews to measure performance can be done any time. Firms can conduct a performance evaluation whenever they read reviews. This evaluation process is beneficial because it can help firms to minimise the gap between their procedures and their perceptions about how they have acted with the actual service delivery that consumers received (more elaborate discussion about this is presented in section 4.2.5). The excerpt

below is an example of how a general manager uses information from the review to maintain a good performance:

> *Often the customer will mention something, and it may not be particularly negative, but it might be something constructive, that actually might help us in the way that we operate and the way we run the hotel or the way something looks, whatever it might be (H11, general manager, 3-star independent boutique hotel).*

In addition to using reviews to review their own performance, hospitality firms could also use them to compare their performance with that of their competitors (Gao *et al.*, 2018). Hospitality firms could view their competitors' reviews in order to understand their strengths and weaknesses so that they can maintain their competitive advantage. This would enable them to offer the best service quality to their customers (Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019), as described by one participant below:

> *It enables me to benchmark our performance on meetings and events against some of the other brands which previously we didn't have that information. And that's quite useful (H1, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).*

Measuring a hotel's performance against reviews and against its competitors reviews are important activities in that they provide accurate information about a hotel's strengths and weaknesses. This information is crucial for developing the right corrective actions and improving customer satisfaction (Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019).

4.2.2.3 Input for hotel's strategy

Information from the reviews can also be used by hospitality firms to craft a marketing strategy. Companies allocate a budget to do market research which will inform them about the market conditions before they develop a strategy. Information from reviews can be used for a similar purpose. When hotels participated in the study spotted the same information was being presented numerous times, they use that information to develop a strategy, as stated below:

> *So we've taken reviews saying that we don't have a cocktail menu, and there were a few people who said that, so we then incorporate a cocktail menu for the bar. Some people said that the choice of our bottle beer is not enough, so we increase that. That is the sort of thing when we feel that the feedback is so important. So what we do is we got the seasonal menu, however, they said, you should start doing some special of the day. So we started incorporating the special of the day. This is not one person saying it, so we have more than 10 people saying 'oh we*

need to do something differently', and yes, we do something differently (H2, operation manager, 4-star chain hotel).

The above excerpt is evidence of how a hotel manager acted strategically in response to information received through reviews. Consumer reviews are also useful when firms have a long list of things that need to be done, as it helps them to prioritise:

We monitor what people complain about, and then we'll prioritize accordingly. If they need to be some attic painting on the property or something like that and the majority of the guest complain about the beds, we might prioritize getting new beds before painting. So yes, the reviews have an impact (H4, general manager, 2-star chain hotel).

Even though the above excerpt contains a pretend example to stress his point, this excerpt is proof that information from reviews has been used to help prioritise their strategy. This is important since hotels have to implement a number of strategies but are constrained by their limited resources. Therefore, hospitality firms need to prioritise the most important actions for earlier implementation. Consumer reviews can provide them with the information they need to make that decision. Some participants from hospitality firms used the number of reviews as the indicator of its urgency.

Other than that, these participants also need some financial support to implement the strategy. Again, online consumer reviews can be helpful in this case. One participant claimed that he had presented reviews as part of his proposal to the owner of the hotel as evidence to back up the strategy that he was developing at that time:

Present evidence that this is the customers are saying about this product and it's not good enough. Therefore I need the money to do something about it (H7, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

This business participant admitted that his proposal was given more consideration because it had supporting evidence from the reviews. Therefore, this offers evidence that reviews are also beneficial for hospitality firms in terms of convincing the owner or shareholders of a much-needed investment.

4.2.2.4 Induce consumers' interest

Finally, the last benefit of reviews for hospitality firms is that they can trigger consumers' interest in the hotel. A number of studies have proved that consumer reviews are effective in attracting interest (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013), which has a positive impact on performance

(Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Mkono and Tribe, 2016; Viglia, Minazzi and Buhalis, 2016). This is confirmed by one participant as follow:

> *The people that have not visited here before will use that review as an influence whether they book it or not. And that's whether it's a 1 bedroom on the weekend or whether that's a big business for us. So, it massively influential (H7, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).*

The above excerpt demonstrates the business participant's conviction regarding the power of reviews to attract customers to the accommodation. The participant is a general manager for a hotel which frequently hosts conferences. By 'big business', he was referring to the companies which use the hotel as their conference venue. These companies not only rent the conference room but also book rooms for the delegates. By having a conference or big function event in the hotel, hotels could sell both their rooms and their function space.

Some of the hotel participants stated that most reviewers are leisure guests. These types of guests are the ones that stay in the hotel during the weekend for leisure purposes. On the other hand, companies which are organising conferences are considered as business guests. Even though they do not often write reviews, business guests do apparently use reviews to inform their decision to stay at a hotel, as suggested by the statement above.

Another example of how online reviews can induce potential consumers' interest is as follow:

> *If it is something that could be major to me as well, I will definitely focus on… but if it, maybe like, I really want that hotel and this complaint could be something that the hotel could address if, maybe I talk to them, I don't mind ringing them and asking like, "Is it okay if I come and you could adjust this for me?" I don't know, maybe like, it could be simple stuff like food or my checking in. I'm coming like after the checking in hour or can I stay more hours after the checkout time? These kinds of things – maybe they will say yes on the website, you can definitely stay to reassure customers but they do it if they are full, so maybe in that case, if I really want to stay like one hour more, I would call the hotel in advance and make sure that I get confirmation that they would do it for me (PG31, female, 26, married, PhD student).*

The above excerpt is evidence of how reviews have induced a potential guest's interest towards the hotel which leads them into taking some further action to secure the service they desire. It is also an example of how a participant dealt with a negative review. She did not automatically take the hotel out of her list, but instead she called the hotel to double check the review as well as to gain reassurance. This is an example of how a negative review

could still benefit the hotel, of how a participant is still being mindful about the negative reviews.

Hospitality firms can also use online consumer reviews to induce consumers' interest by collating the reviews in their marketing communications to provide potential consumers with information from real guests (Gregoire, Salle and Tripp, 2015). This can help arouse consumer interest in the accommodation. These findings support previous studies suggesting that online consumer reviews have a positive impact on consumer purchasing behaviour (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Tsao, 2014; Mkono and Tribe, 2016), which leads to an impact on the hotel's occupancy rates and performance (Ye, Law and Gu, 2009; Clare *et al.*, 2016; Viglia, Minazzi and Buhalis, 2016; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018).

4.2.3   The negative side of reviews

There are two sides to every story: for every positive side there is always a negative side. These negative sides of reviews were reported by participants from all groups; hospitality firms, reviewers and potential guests. They include customers' misbehaviour due to their increased bargaining power caused by their influence on other consumers' perception (section 4.2.3.1), the behaviour of some customers who decided not to make a direct complaint and preferred to write it on the review site instead (section 4.2.3.2) and the untrustworthy characteristic of some reviews which has tarnished the reputation of consumer reviews as a whole (section 4.2.3.3). Furthermore, consumer reviews are a form of information based on the opinions of reviewers. Therefore, they will always be subjective. Even though the majority of reviewers participating in this study claimed that they always made sure to only write the facts, they also stated that they add their opinions to the reviews. The discussion about the subjective nature of reviews can be found in section 4.2.3.4. And finally, since information from the internet is easily accessible, consumers can access a great deal of such information instantly. In a previous section the thesis discussed how this has enhanced consumers' bargaining power. However, it can also generate a different effect: the abundance of information available from reviews has made some reviewers and potential guests feel overwhelmed (section 4.2.3.5).

4.2.3.1 Consumers' misbehaviour

The internet has drastically changed marketing communication practice due to the emergence of interactive online media (Keller, 2001). The most important capabilities of interactive online media concerning mass communication, is that it enables not only companies but also individuals, as consumers and/or reviewers, to communicate and share

their thoughts and opinions with the whole world at a low cost (Dellarocas, 2003). Reviews have enabled customers (i.e., reviewers) to share their opinions about a service experience with the world (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Since information from reviewers is perceived as more trustworthy than advertising (Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay, 2015), many potential consumers prefer this platform as their information source (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013).

Research has shown that consumer reviews have a positive impact on consumer purchasing behaviour (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Mkono and Tribe, 2016). In the context of tourism, they also have an impact on hotels' occupancy rates and performance (Ye, Law and Gu, 2009; Viglia, Minazzi and Buhalis, 2016). Indeed, some hotels interviewed for the study expressed frustration when they received negative reviews. They genuinely believed that negative reviews could damage their hotel's reputation.

Because of this belief, hospitality firms work extremely hard to prevent negative reviews. They focus exceptional effort into systems and processes to deliver desired standards of service quality (Gregoire, Salle and Tripp, 2015). Guest satisfaction is a key focus for service providers. However, despite best efforts and intentions in these processes in the hospitality sector, there is a perception amongst some of the participants in the hotel group, that some customers abuse their power by posting reviews that are contrary to what the hotels expressed as their delivered service, seeking to manipulate them in various ways. These perceptions were expressed by respondents who considered that customers are highly aware of the impacts that negative reviews have on a hotel's reputation, and this misbehaviour was revealed when they demanded something in return for not writing a negative review. Customers have asked for discounts; room upgrades or other benefits. The following is an example of this type of experience:

> *We got told on departure that they didn't like the bedroom, or this wasn't working but they hadn't told us. It's very difficult then for us as a hotel to rectify and put it right so then you go down the compensation line (H8, guest relation officer, 4-star chain hotel).*

The above excerpt is an example of how the participant gave a customer some compensation because they genuinely wanted to satisfy the customer. This was an example of a service recovery initiative, in order to prevent further complaint. This is also an example of how consumers have gained substantial power in the era of online consumer reviews (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018): consumers can get better service quality because they can write a review about their service experience afterwards. Even though this particular customer did not specifically say that she/he would write a negative review, as

mentioned on the above excerpt, the participant admitted that her hotel gave the compensation because they wanted to prevent a more damaging complaint. This is also reported by another participant as follow:

> *If they have a legitimate negative feedback at check-out, we will look to it and offer some free or discount on stay, a complimentary stay (H9, general manager, 3-star independent hotel).*

One participant from the consumer group has given an example of her complaint behaviour. According to her experience, she gets additional benefit whenever she files a complaint to the hotel:

> *We usually do verbal complain sometimes at the hotel and we get a good deal out of them. Like when we complain about the room wasn't clean, the hotel then gave us a free breakfast. When they do that, I know that they care about us, so I don't write a bad review about them. We don't lash out. Initially, you need to lash out. (R17, female, 30, married with children, PhD student).*

According to the above excerpt, this customer came to the hotel's desk without a bad intention to the hotel. She informed the hotel about her condition and then received a satisfying solution. The decision to write a review comes after the hotel's recovery initiative. On this instance, she did not write a bad review since she was satisfied with the hotel's solution. However, the following account from a hotel's owner tells of a different experience:

> *You will get your people who will come and stay, will find something wrong or will create something wrong because they want a discount, and if you don't give them a discount, they'll then threaten to, oh, I'm going to go on TripAdvisor, I'm going to give you a bad review if you don't give me this discount (H10, the owner of a 4-star country house hotel).*

This excerpt clearly shows how hospitality firms perceive the actions of some customers as abusing their power to achieve benefits or outcomes, which has been called corrupt complaints in the literature (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). Furthermore, some of the hotel respondents reported that they believe some reviewers have a negative ulterior motive. They did not believe that reviewers were acting out of altruistic motives to help other tourists. Some firms in this study believed that customers seek revenge by spreading negative word of mouth (Grégoire, Laufer and Tripp, 2010) and an online platform is a powerful medium to do that (Obeidat *et al.*, 2018). The majority of hospitality firms' opinions about reviewers' motives tended to be negative:

You will sometimes get people who are leaving, and they'll have a complaint and they'll say 'If you don't give my room money back, I'll put something on TripAdvisor' (H3, marketing manager, 4-star independent boutique hotel)s

A lot of them are wanting for something, that's the reason why they're writing the review (H8, guest relations officer, 4-star chain hotel).

Somebody will feel inclined to post a bad review, and often they're just trying it on, they're hoping that the way to deal with the bad experience is to offer them a free complimentary stay, and you have to be mindful of that; people will try it on (H12, business development manager, 4-star independent hotel).

The above excerpts are illustrative of how hotel respondents perceive the motives of some of their customers as abusing their bargaining power. On several occasions, the participants stated they did not give in to this pressure. However, negative perceptions about reviews and customer's behaviour in respect of them were apparent from most hospitality firms interviewed; suggesting they have experienced this issue quite frequently. This type of perceived practice can be understood as consumer misbehaviour. Consumer misbehaviour is the "behavioural acts by consumers, which violate the generally accepted norms of conduct in consumption situations, and thus disrupt the consumption order" (Fullerton and Punj, 2004, p. 1239). This practice could be considered a form of blackmail by hotels, violating accepted norms and disrupting the consumption order, which could explain the strong views such behaviour elicited.

On the other hand, not all the participants from the reviewer group claimed to be motivated by revenge, perhaps unsurprisingly given social desirability bias in the interview situation. More reviewer participants claimed that they write reviews to express their gratitude to the hotel for good service. Another prominent motivation that was disclosed by the majority of these participants was to help other consumers, potential guests. Since many participants received benefits from reading reviews, their motivations were largely driven by a desire to help others in the same way. Meanwhile, some others stated that they wrote the review as a form of self-expression. Writing a positive review made them feel positive about themselves, while writing negative reviews helped them release their psychological tensions about their experiences.

These findings correspond to the literature about consumers' motivations in spreading electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Previous research on the motives for engagement in online word of mouth highlighted social benefits, economic incentives, concern for others, and extraversion/self-enhancement (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Munar and Jacobsen,

2014; Yen and Tang, 2015) as well as receiving service recovery (Grégoire *et al.*, 2018) and altruism (Parra-López *et al.*, 2011; Ma and Chan, 2014). Furthermore, other research has categorised reviews into positive and negative motivations (Hu and Kim, 2018); self-enhancement and enjoyment are positive motivations, while venting negative feelings were negative motivations. Interestingly, both altruism and economic incentives could be both positive and negative motivations. Furthermore, specifically in relation to online complaining behaviour, some studies have suggested that there are three main motives, comprising; solution seeking, support seeking and social engagement (Dolan, Seo and Kemper, 2019).

In conclusion, online review sites have presented a great many benefits to consumers, increasing their overall satisfaction through closing gaps between perceived, expected and experienced levels of service quality. Reviews are also helpful in facilitating buying decisions and calibrating perceptions of service quality, which are understood as being realistic and trustworthy. From the viewpoint of service providers however, reviews are seen as potentially distorting the bargaining power of customers when used as a threat by customers to leverage some benefits. Internet communication has caused companies to lose their control over how their brand and products are communicated (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013, p. 324). Unfortunately, this power sometimes leads to "guests threatening to write negative reviews to gain upgrades, free services or financial compensation, known as corrupt complaints" (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018, p. 12). However, from the perspective of reviewers, there are a range of motivations, both positive and negative, for providing inputs into reviewing platforms. This shows a disconnect between the range of perceptions about reviews from the different participant groups.

4.2.3.2 Consumers' avoidance of direct communication

As many companies have now integrated social media into their businesses, many consumers have followed, showing their preference for complaining online (Grégoire *et al.*, 2018). This was confirmed by several hospitality firms participating in the study. These participants felt that online complaints or negatives reviews are harmful to their reputation. Similar to a study conducted by Gössling et al. (2018), these participants reported that there were many consumers who chose to write a review instead of communicating their concerns directly. Some examples of such reservations about consumer reviews are as follow:

> *People don't come to the reception and say I've got this issue, they put it on TripAdvisor afterwards. You had a chat with someone in the morning and they will say 'yes, it's fine, I enjoyed it' and then you find them on TripAdvisor afterwards (H3, marketing manager, 4-star independent boutique hotel).*

We definitely had a couple of instances where people are still staying in the hotel and rather than speak to myself or the duty manager when they have an issue, they'll be in their bedroom, typing on TripAdvisor because their heating is not working or they don't have their room service yet (H7, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

A lot of the time the guest just chose to go home and write a review instead of speaking to us at the hotel or during the stay. Sometimes you get people who have been with us for a week and not mentioned a single thing and then they go around and write the review (H9, general manager, 3-star independent hotel).

The above excerpts are examples of how consumers have become less and less motivated to complain directly. Almost all participants from the hotel group highlighted the same issue, emphasising the prevalence of this behaviour In some instances, reviewers participating in this study confirmed this, describing how they chose to write a review instead of going to reception to make a complaint directly:

I doubt that I'd have contacted the hotel (R1, female, 29, single, PhD student)

If I went back to the reception and complained, he (her husband) would not be really happy, so I just put on my laptop and just complained (R26, female, 35, married with children, PhD student).

If it was something small, I wouldn't directly complain maybe, I would just write about it and then it's up to them if they want to respond to it (R43, male, 63, married, university staff)

I feel that this is the right platform to communicate with the hotel (R15, female, 30, married, PhD student)

I think that is the best way to make the management know about the issue that they have (R14, male, 28, single, PhD student)

In fact, this behaviour can be disadvantageous since it can cause consumers to miss out on the possibility of experiencing better service quality. Most of the service marketers interviewed claimed that they would always try to rectify the problems reported to them directly, while consumers were still staying with them. Therefore, by choosing to write a review, consumers may miss the opportunity to have any problems rectified during their stay.

Participants from the reviewers' group mentioned several reasons why they choose to write reviews. The first is because of some external influence. The second excerpt above describes how the participant did not put the complaint forward at the time she was staying because it might upset her husband. Her husband did not want her to be involved in an argument and waste time on what he thought was an unimportant matter. Therefore, this participant wrote the review.

The next reason for choosing to write the review instead of complaining directly was because the service failure was deemed to be minor. The participant in the third excerpt thought that the complaint was not something major that needed to be rectified at the time he was staying at the accommodation. He decided to continue his stay and wrote about the service failure in his review afterwards. However, people's perception of something being major or minor is also subjective. He might feel that his problem was small but for other people, it might be deemed as a big problem and might stop them from choosing the accommodation. Therefore, it became a big problem for the hospitality firms.

The last reason reported by the reviewers is their conviction that consumer reviews are an appropriate medium for feedback. The word feedback is used here because the reviews could be about a positive experience or a negative complaint ('the issue'). This perception is reinforced by the fact that these participants were also influenced by reviews and believed that hospitality firms read and responded to the reviews. The reviewers believed that hospitality firms read reviews because they want to maintain their online reputation. Therefore, instead of going directly to the front office and communicating their feedback directly, they chose to write the review in order to gain the hotel's attention.

Participants chose not to communicate directly with the hospitality firms because it was more convenient, and they were convinced that hospitality firms would read the reviews and instigate some improvements. However, since other consumers might have different perceptions about the complaint and form a negative perception about the hotel, most participating hospitality firms stated that they prefer direct communication. The following is an example of how consumer reviews frustrate a participant from the hotel group, and how this general manager prefers receiving direct feedback:

> *From that point of view, it can be a bit frustrating. But in the main, all of this thing is a great tool, it's what we are as far as hospitality firms, we want people to tell us what we do well and what we don't do and what we need to improve on. The more channels there are and the more live the information is, the better it is for us to be able to improve our business. Ultimately, it's good, information is good. [However]*

the preference will always be somebody give you the opportunity to put something right before it goes on to a public forum which as I say, can be used to and influence whether somebody book a future piece of business with us or not. (H7, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

In conclusion, some participants have chosen not to engage in direct communication with hospitality firms after a service failure because they assumed that the failure was too minor or due to the influence of others which inhibited a direct complaint. Lastly, many participants also thought that online review was the best medium to communicate their feedback. This behaviour can generate disadvantages for both consumers and hotels. Consumers can miss out on their chance of better service quality by doing this, while hospitality firms might suffer reputational damage due to the negative reviews.

Most participants from the hotel group felt that they had been treated unjustly by customers' avoidance of engaging in direct communication (i.e., complaining) because they were not given a chance to rectify the problem. None of this would have existed before the advent of online reviews because customers would complaint directly and hotels would rectify the problem. Moreover, most service marketers interviewed also sincerely believe that potential guests would read and trust every review on the websites. Therefore, when a negative review appeared, most of them felt frustrated because they knew that consumers would form negative perceptions, and this would damage their hotel's online reputation. Most participants from the hotel group preferred to have direct communication with their customers, especially regarding a complaint. Although the literature has claimed that many consumers prefer to complain online by writing a review (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018; Grégoire *et al.*, 2018), this research has not taken into consideration hospitality firms' perspectives, especially regarding consumers' tendency to avoid direct communication. Thus, this thesis presents a more nuanced understanding of the role and uses of online reviews by different actors.

Regarding the motivation for writing reviews, the literature suggests that for positive reviews, the following motivations apply: altruism (i.e., to help others to make a better decision), product involvement, self-enhancement, and helping the company (Yoo and Gretzel, 2008). For negative reviews, the motivations are altruism (i.e., to prevent others from having the same bad experience), anxiety reduction, vengeance and advice seeking (Sundaram, Mitra and Webster, 1998). Some findings from this thesis have confirmed these motivations, especially the altruism motive, or concern for other consumers.

However, there are three additional reasons mentioned by the participants in the study which can be considered as a new contribution to the literature. One of the reasons, peer pressure, can be seen as an additional motivation that might encourage consumers to write a review and discourage them from making a direct complaint. While the other two reasons - the degree of service failure and consumer perception that a review website is the best medium for complaining - could be seen as the factors contributing to consumers' tendency to write reviews. These findings can give a more nuanced discussion in the literature about consumers motivation to write reviews.

4.2.3.3 Untrustworthy

Much attention has been given to fake reviews (Keates, 2007). Even though many participants from all three groups have gained benefits from reviews, there was still some hesitation about their authenticity as stated below:

> *If there aren't reviews in addition, it probably wouldn't be top of the list that we want to consider. I wouldn't say that we would reject it an end of the hand, but the review helps quite a lot because they are, I hope, real people that have stayed there (R4, female, 50s, married, university staff).*

The above excerpt demonstrates how one participant, a reviewer, still had some doubts about the trustworthiness of consumer reviews. The fact that even a reviewer who has received numerous benefits from reviews has a concern about this suggests that most readers (i.e., potential guests and hospitality firms) would have similar concerns.

Numerous participants from all three groups in the study have described this concern. This perception was formed either by something that they have experienced, or from something that they learned elsewhere – from word of mouth or information from the media. One example of such perception can be seen from the following example:

> *Nothing stopping a competitor of yours having a negative review about you. I'd like to believe that it doesn't happen, I don't think it does, but it could be (H7, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).*

The above excerpt shows the suspicion of a participant from the hotel group about a practice undertaken by some other hospitality firms who write negative reviews about their competitors. Even though he said that he was not sure whether it really happens, we can assume that some actions from competitors contribute to his suspicion. The same suspicion is also apparent in another study which suggests that as competition becomes more strict, the pressure to conduct a dishonest practice may increase (Gössling, Hall and Andersson,

2018). In fact, several studies have confirmed that some firms have systematically manipulated online consumer reviews (Hu *et al.*, 2012; Anderson and Simester, 2014; Mayzlin, Dover and Chevalier, 2014; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). According to this research, manipulation can be done through promotional review (Mayzlin, Dover and Chevalier, 2014) in the form of self-review to praise their own product (Dellarocas, 2006), and fake-review (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). Another participant gave an example of how hospitality firms engage in actions which can be considered as suspicious as follows:

> *The company was writing reviews, they're writing reviews about their hotel, but TripAdvisor flagged it up because somehow, they knew that it was from the same computer. Or I think they asked their guest to write their feedback on their IPad say if you had a good stay, do you mind to write your review now? (H8, guest relation officer, 4-star chain hotel).*

The excerpt above explains how some hotels generate some positive reviews by themselves. These firms ask their customers who had a good experience to write their review and hand them the device with which to do so. Some websites then flagged these reviews as not genuine because they came from the same IP address. Even though the reviews were original and written by the customers, the above participant sees it as a forced initiative.

Another example of a hotel participant's suspicion is presented below. In this excerpt, the participant formed his suspicion after investigating a particular review. It turned out that the review was written by a person who has written numerous negative reviews about several hotels in the same geographic location and only wrote a positive review of one particular hotel. This suspicion was reasonable, especially after the participant found out that the reviewer did not even stay at the accommodation.

> *For example, there's a review from a person and all the reviews were one star and based in Nottingham except for one hotel and thing so, sometimes there's a pattern that you can see if it's not a legitimate review. You can also see from there that they've not actually stayed as well (H9, general manager, 3-star independent hotel).*

According to some participants from the hotel group, fake reviews are mostly spotted on TripAdvisor. The reason for this is because it's an easy platform to leave a review on. Unlike other online travel agents, who also provide reviews on their websites, TripAdvisor allows the consumer to write a review about any accommodation without having any proof of booking. On other review websites such as Booking.com, consumers can only write a review

if they have stayed in a room which was booked via that website. This is why some companies can also write a review about themselves or their competitors on TripAdvisor:

We've had people leave a review and we don't think they even stayed here, and people can leave malicious, competitors could leave malicious reviews but they don't have to prove to TripAdvisor they've stayed here, you're free to, anybody could leave a review on a hotel, on TripAdvisor on anybody's business entry if they want to do something malicious, we can't prevent that (H12, business development manager, 4-star independent hotel).

Some participants from the potential guest and reviewer groups also held the same suspicion. These participants said that even though they have not heard or seen someone writing a fake review, they suspected that some businesses might ask someone to help them. These participants were actively using reviews, though the suspicion about fake reviews was always on their minds:

Don't know if it's my own perception, but I think that maybe, you know, people can request other people to volunteer and just write some good reviews on a friendship… (PG29, male, 40s, single, PhD student).

I think I trust them to a certain degree, but I would never expect them to be fully trustworthy. So, for example as I was saying before sometimes, I'm suspicious that somebody with a vested interest might have posted or that someone who was angry, or a competitor might have said something really terrible (R19, female, 31, single, PhD student).

Another example came from a reviewer who learned from a hotel staff, who is also her relative, about how consumers can write a review which is not true:

My cousin who looks after the media for my uncle and aunt he knows that some of the reviews are a load of rubbish because he recognises the person describing what happened and he knows that that isn't actually what happened. Or, you know, he knows that's not quite actually what happened. He's had a couple of really bad reviews and he's written back to the person and just sort of tried to say, this isn't actually…you know, in a nice, polite way. That isn't actually what happened. So, he's had some experiences of people sort of trying to make things worse than they are or just making things up, as well. That weren't true (R49, female, 49, single, freelance).

Besides hospitality firms who write fake reviews about themselves or about their competitors, and reviewers who write reviews for the wrong reasons, another source of untrustworthiness is the website organisers themselves. One participant did not have any suspicions about the hotel management's conduct, but suspected the involvement of the platform organiser in choosing only certain reviews to be shown on the website:

> *I worry about sometimes Booking.com, such a kind of platform, going to choose which ones to publish instead of put up every single one, but I don't doubt about the hotel owners (R38, female, 33, single, PhD student).*

According to this participant, the review sites are somewhat untrustworthy because they filter reviews. Instead of posting all reviews submitted to the site, they pick and choose which reviews to publish. Even though the reviews were real stories experienced by real consumers, because not all reviews were presented, she was concerned of not being able to form a holistic image of the hotel. This participant's suspicion was not entirely wrong. Platforms such as TripAdvisor are in fact engaged in some filtering of reviews that they receive. However, the motive for this action is not to filter out genuine reviews. On the contrary, its sole purpose is to prevent the publication of fake reviews (Proserpio and Zervas, 2017)[2]. Furthermore, this suspicion could also be generated by a partnership between hospitality firms and TripAdvisor resulting in more reviews with better ratings being published for the hotel (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018).

Having learned about participants' perceptions presented in this section, it can be concluded that even though they were still using the reviews, many participants felt cautious when reading them. Even though many participants have acknowledged numerous benefits offered by reviews, the issue of trustworthiness was always in the back of their minds. These findings are similar to those arising from studies about credibility (Casaló *et al.*, 2015b) or trustworthiness (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013; Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay, 2015). They are also consistent with findings about fake (Keates, 2007; Larson and Denton, 2014; Luca and Zervas, 2016) and paid online reviews (Dellarocas, 2006; Ayeh, Au and Law, 2016) which could be seen as a form of strategic manipulation (Dellarocas, 2006; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). However, many participants claimed that they still read reviews because they are deemed a better source of information than a company's marketing efforts (Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay, 2015). Therefore, to maximise the benefits while minimising the negative side of reviews, readers use several cues in order to assess the trustworthiness of

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[2] For more information, please see
http://www.tripadvisor.com/vpages/review_mod_fraud_detect.html.

reviews (Filieri, 2016). More discussion about participants' evaluation strategy is presented in section 4.2.4.

4.2.3.4 Subjective nature

Early research suggested that online consumer reviews can give readers unbiased information about products (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2003), however, recent studies have suggested that many reviews can even be fabricated and manipulated (Hu *et al.*, 2012; Anderson and Simester, 2014; Mayzlin, Dover and Chevalier, 2014; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). Moreover, the majority of participants from all three groups agreed that information from reviews is subjective. They believe that reviews are written by reviewers who have a 'hidden' agenda based on their judgement which was heavily influenced by their personality. The following excerpt is a good example of how two reviewers have different perceptions regarding the same event:

> *One of the reviews was "we went to this lovely intimate restaurant; it was so nice and quiet. My wife and I were able to talk to each other; we had nice wine, we had a nice meal. It was so relaxing; it was lovely, then we went up to bed. We had a nice night's sleep, left in the morning. It was lovely". Then the other review we had was, "we walked into a cold, uninteresting restaurant, there was only one other set of people in there. It was so quiet; it was dead. We couldn't enjoy the food because we felt that people were listening to our conversations". You've got to take a judgement on that. (H10, the owner of a 4-star country house hotel).*

The above excerpt is about two reviews of a similar event which were written by two separate reviewers. The participant remembered the two reviews since they were published almost simultaneously, describing what seemed to be the same event. It is interesting to see how the two reviewers use such contrasting words to explain their experience that night. However, since the hotel gives the same treatment to all guests, this excerpt is evidence that the same situation could result in contrasting feedback, resulting from each guest's subjective assessment.

Perception is "a construction from snippets from the past – a complex brain process which every individual undergoes after receiving sensory data (or stimuli) and drawing from their brain's memory banks" (Gregory, 1972, p. 708). Based on this definition, it was normal that the two reviewers mentioned in the excerpt had different perceptions. They are two different individuals who have different memory banks; they have different past experiences and different frames of reference. They might also have different sets of needs and wants. Therefore, for a review to be fully impartial is difficult.

Additionally, when participants felt that reviewers were not genuine and only venting their anger, they would disregard it as useless or superficial information. This 'hidden' agenda was validated by many reviewers who confirmed that their motivation for writing a review was at the highest when they had a terrible experience:

> I wrote a bad review because I want other people to know and not to come to that place. I usually write the review, especially when it's bad and you're angry (laugh), you tend to write something... and also because I was angry, I want the person (the owner) to know that we were not happy. We paid some money, but we were not happy with the service… If it's bad, I will write it faster (laugh). Because I was so angry so I wanted to write it as fast as I could before my anger goes off. (R11, female, 30, married).

The above excerpt was from a reviewer who travels frequently. When describing her experience of staying in various types of accommodation, she instinctively declared that her motivation for writing the review was to vent her anger. The statement was offered without being solicited. She added that when this happens, she would write the review quickly and without hesitation. From her remark that "I want the person (the owner) to know that we were not happy", it is clear that she only wrote about the things that irritated her. This demonstrates the subjective nature of reviews in that the reviewer did not mention anything positive and solely focused on things that had irritated her.

The following excerpt from a prospective guest further demonstrates the subjective nature of reviews. The participant made comments about reviews based on his own experience of writing reviews for different product lines. He believes that reviewers will always add their personal opinion:

> When they make a review, like I assume when I'm writing a review, I'm not doing marketing for that particular place. I'm just giving my review, my feedback about that particular place. That's because there are many reviews, you are reading hundreds of reviews. They are giving their honest opinion about something. So if I'm doing the review, I will also do the same thing. I will tell all of the facts about that accommodation but then tell my personal opinion about it which will affect my rating about the place. (PG16, male, 27, single).

Notice that the participant used the word 'facts' and 'opinion' when explaining his habits when writing reviews (for another product type). Even though he tried to cover all facts about the product, he would also give his opinion about those facts, emphasising the reviews'

subjectivity. Most participants were aware of the subjective nature of reviews. The following excerpt further demonstrates this:

> *Whatever people are saying in their reviews is not gospel, it's not facts and it's not objective and it's not you know, some people might just get angry and might be unreasonable, might have you know, there's so many reasons why people might give negative reviews you know, so you've got to take it with a pinch of salt as the English say, you've got to be careful when you look at these things because you don't know how loaded it is, what motivated the person to provide such a negative (R42, female, 47, married with children, university staff).*

The above excerpt shows us that this participant, as with many other participants, was very careful when reading the reviews because of their subjective nature. They were aware that the reviews were written by someone who might have a 'hidden' motivation. Therefore, it is possible that what was written in the reviews was not applicable to them. Hence the need to adopt a certain strategy when reading the reviews, as discussed in section 4.2.4.

In conclusion, consumer reviews are previous consumers' perceptions or opinions about the service that they experienced. Therefore, it is not surprising to read different reviews regarding the same occasion or experience. This difference could be the result of the various backgrounds, knowledge and experience of reviewers. Reviewers' tendency to selectively choose to write one type of review and not the other, also known as the reporting bias (Dellarocas and Wood, 2008), also provides support for the subjective nature of online consumer reviews. Even though online consumer reviews can give readers unbiased information about products (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2003; Law, 2006), the findings show that the subjective nature of reviews persists.

4.2.3.5 Numerous reviews overwhelm readers

Consumers are faced with an abundance of reviews which are supposed to help them choose a product or service (Gavilan, Avello and Martinez-Navarro, 2018; Tan *et al.*, 2018). However, this multitude of reviews has increased the cognitive effort needed by consumers to assess relevant information (Davis and Agrawal, 2018). This situation has also resulted in information overload which could inhibit consumers from fully taking advantage of the reviews due to limited time, effort and processing capacity (Chan *et al.*, 2017; Gursoy, Del Chiappa and Zhang, 2017; Nan, Yang and Dou, 2017; Singh *et al.*, 2017; Park, 2018). In addition to poorly written reviews (Park, 2018), consumers have become confused by the abundance of reviews (Martin and Pu, 2014).

Consumer review websites have come up with several strategies to tackle this problem. Some websites have introduced a 'helpful' button and the 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' button, asking the reader to vote for the review's helpfulness in the hope that the rest of the site's visitors will find it easier to choose which reviews to read (Singh *et al.*, 2017; Park, 2018). This problem has inspired a number of scholars to conduct research addressing such issues (Nan, Yang and Dou, 2017).

Few participants claimed to feel overwhelmed by reviews in this study. However, the researcher decided to highlight this issue because even though only a small number of examples are available, this is an important issue. As noted in chapter 3, "the theme that has more instances does not mean that it is more crucial than the ones that do not have a lot instances" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 82–6). Below is an example of how a participant, a potential guest, stated his confusion after reading a number of reviews:

> *And it's confusing, okay, which one…? How do you choose, because there will be many positives and a few negatives and then it's quite confusing as to what do you choose? (PG29, male, 40s, single, PhD student).*

From the above excerpt it is apparent that the confusion was caused by multiple reviews with different valence. Valence is the assessment about a review or a collection of reviews, whether it leans toward a positive or negative evaluation (Browning, So and Sparks, 2013). Some hotels might have numerous positive and negative reviews or neutral reviews about one particular subject. This participant, who did not have any knowledge or experience of the hotel, expressed some difficulty in deciding which opinion he should lean towards. This made it harder for him to evaluate the hotel. Combined with other reviews which also have different valence, the confusion mounted.

In conclusion, reviews can make participants overwhelmed and confused. Instead of being able to make a decision quickly, some participants experienced the opposite. This finding corresponds with research which has shown that consumers are unable to take full advantage of reviews due to limited time, cognitive effort and limited information processing capacity (Chan *et al.*, 2017; Gursoy, Del Chiappa and Zhang, 2017; Nan, Yang and Dou, 2017; Singh *et al.*, 2017; Park, 2018). The negative sides of reviews, in addition to participants' limited time, cognitive effort and processing capacity, have caused them to adopt strategies in order to enjoy the full benefit of reviews. These strategies are discussed below.

4.2.4 Reviewers and potential guests' evaluation strategy – being mindful about the reviews

It is clear that online consumer reviews have a positive impact on consumer purchasing behaviour (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Mkono and Tribe, 2016), which leads to an impact on hotels' occupancy rates and performance (Ye, Law and Gu, 2009; Viglia, Minazzi and Buhalis, 2016). However, there is still some debate among scholars about which review valence (positive or negative) has more impact upon consumers. Some scholars suggest that positive reviews have a constructive impact on a company's performance, while negative reviews will have the opposite effect (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Phillips *et al.*, 2016; Chan *et al.*, 2017). A number of scholars add that negative reviews have more destructive power than positive reviews have constructive power (Browning, So and Sparks, 2013).

However, some other scholars suggest otherwise, claiming that negative reviews can increase sales by increasing product awareness (Berger, Sorensen and Rasmussen, 2010), probably because some consumers found them to be more helpful (Eslami, Ghasemaghaei and Hassanein, 2018). Lastly, another group of scholars suggest that the presence of a positive review among a number of negative reviews can have a favourable impact on consumers' decisions, while the presence of a negative review in the middle of numerous positive reviews may not have the same effect in changing consumers' choices (Book *et al.*, 2018). Whatever the results, scholars agree that review valence has a significant influence upon sales (Marchand, Hennig-Thurau and Wiertz, 2017).

Various behaviours were reported by the participants of this study that relate to the findings reported within the literature. Some participants claimed that they formed a negative perception whenever they read a negative review. However, there were also a number of participants who argued that they preferred to read negative reviews and have received some benefit from reading negative reviews. They did not necessarily form a negative perspective after reading negative reviews. Instead, they continued reading the reviews until they made an evaluation of the hotel:

> *I do rely on reviews a lot. It's not just for holidays it's for online shopping or whatever. You know, often if I see, don't buy this! I won't buy it. [However], I think if you take quite a holistic qualitative look at them, you know, scan and look at them you can get an overall impression of what they're like (PG47, male, 49, married, university staff).*

The above excerpt shows us that the participant, a potential guest, usually did not just make a judgement based on a few reviews. He read quite a lot of reviews and analysed them before finally forming a judgement about the accommodation. This is also supported by the following excerpts:

> *I'll just check out what the negatives are and whether I can live with those negatives (PG25, female, 38, married with children, doctor).*

> *When the criticisms are only about some secondary issue in my opinion, so I might try to say, "Okay, let me consider this hotel" (PG30, male, 29, single, PhD student).*

Even though they deserve to have the best service, many participants also realise that nothing is perfect. Therefore, even though some participants read a negative review, it did not stop them from considering the accommodation. However, they would still read the review carefully and decide after they had analysed its content and made an evaluation.

As seen from the above excerpts, these participants continued their evaluation of the accommodation even after reading a negative review about that accommodation. This could be attributed to the subjective characteristic of the review; something perceived as negative by a consumer might be seen as positive by others. Another participant, a reviewer, proposed a different strategy for evaluating reviews:

> *I feel I can make a fairly good judgement, if there's enough reviews to be able to kind of see past that then I feel like you can make a reasonably solid judgement particularly if you're comparing from different websites I would say (R19, female, 31, single, PhD student).*

In order to make a holistic judgement, the participant above decided to read reviews from a number of different websites. She felt that she could make a better judgment when she had more information about a particular hotel. Another example of a participant being mindful about the reviews is as follows:

> *I'm more mindful on the negative things, because for instance if some people mention the noises then I'll just bear this in mind, and I will think about whether I can handle it or not, I think that's quite important, and if someone mentions maybe there's no shower or the shower is very cold, then I need to double check with the hotel (R38, female, 33, single, PhD student).*

From the above excerpt, we can see that there is some degree of importance in the way this participant, a reviewer, evaluated and analysed the reviews. A negative review would not

change her perception immediately. She evaluated the degree of importance of the issue being discussed in the review before making her decision.

That is why, instead of only reading every review passively, some participants decided to be more active and did some background investigation of the review. This extra effort was conducted because they need the confidence to make a reasonable and informed decision. This is especially due to the fact that the hospitality product is experiential, intangible and the consumer cannot try the product before purchase, even though it tends to be more costly (Gursoy, 2018; Tan *et al.*, 2018). This section discusses a number of strategies used by participants when they are evaluating reviews, which consist of using their prior knowledge, utilising the self-congruity and functional congruity concept, and investigating the reviewer's characteristics before making some judgement about the accommodation.

4.2.4.1 Utilising prior knowledge

One strategy adopted by a number of participants is using their prior knowledge. This information could be general information about the destination or information about the hotel itself, which could be acquired from word-of-mouth communication. The excerpt below is an example of how a participant, a reviewer, used this strategy in order to make some evaluation about a review:

> *Interestingly I went to a small place in the south of Spain and the complaints were that it's so steep and it's like a lot of distance to carry the luggage and the complaints were like that in the reviews and I actually knew it was a very interesting historical area with a historic city there like an old town. So, I was thinking it's not like you could really complain if someone didn't do the research before. So, for example, such complaints are actually telling you that if you want to get a little bit of history of a particular region then the complaint is a compliment. If you know what I mean. So, I always read those reviews first (R48, female, 40s, university staff).*

The above excerpt shows us that this particular participant did not form a negative perception about the hotel even after reading the complaint. Rather, she gained beneficial information for her travel, having compared her previous knowledge and the information from the review. She was able to make a comparison and even developed a positive attitude towards the hotel. Furthermore, she was blaming the reviewer for not doing some research before they booked the hotel. She thought that the reviewer would not write a negative review based on that particular issue if they had undertaken an adequate information search beforehand.

Another participant gave an example of how he utilised his prior knowledge about reviews to make some inferences about the review's trustworthiness as follow:

> *If they are going to lie, they usually give a general comment but if they are giving a longer review with detailed information, it tends to be genuine ((PG16, male, 27, single, PhD student).*

From the above excerpt we can learn that participants use all sorts of knowledge that they have in order to help make judgements about the trustworthiness of reviews. Since consumers are faced with an abundance of reviews while they only have limited resources, they use their prior knowledge to evaluate reviews.

4.2.4.2 Utilising the self-congruity concept

Self-congruity is the matching process between a consumer's identity and the brand, or the user of the brand (Sirgy, 2018). It stems from the self-concept theory, which according to Rosenberg means the "totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference himself as an object" (Sirgy, 1982, p. 287). Furthermore, two motives, which are self-esteem and self-consistency, influence the self-concept. The self-esteem motive means that people will perform something which will enhance their self-concept, while the self-consistency motive means that people will have the propensity to behave according to their view of themselves (Sirgy, 1982).

If applied to explain consumer behaviour, the self-esteem motive simply suggests that the consumer would have the motivation to purchase products which have positive value in terms of obtaining a positive self-image. Self-consistency, on the other hand, means that a consumer will only purchase products which have an image congruent with their self-image belief (Sirgy, 1982). In other words, consumers purchase a product which has similar image to their own, or a product which will elevate their self-image. These concepts have been used in various instances of consumer behaviour research, including in the tourism context.

The earliest tourism research using the self-concept theory was Chon (1992) (Litvin and Goh, 2002). This study, and a number of other tourism studies afterwards, investigated the self-congruity theory and destinations as brands in different settings (Chon, 1992; Sirgy and Su, 2000; Litvin and Goh, 2002; Beerli, Meneses and Gil, 2007; Boksberger *et al.*, 2011; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011; Pratt and Sparks, 2014). In a slightly different context to the aforementioned articles, Gration, Raciti, & Arcodia (2011) conducted a comparison between general travel motivation and festival motivation by utilising self-concept theory. Furthermore, Gazley & Watling (2015) incorporated self-concept, self-congruity, motivation

and symbolic consumption and concluded that tourists' perceptions were formed based on the similarity between their self and the product or experience.

To explain the relationship between the reader and the writer using self-congruity theory, one study has concluded that a blogger's personal brand will be quite similar to the readers' self-image (Wang *et al.*, 2015). Using the same approach, this study uses self-concept as well as self-congruity theory to explain readers' behaviour in choosing amongst the abundance of online consumer reviews when they are in the decision-making process. This is the first time that such an approach has been taken in the context of online consumer reviews. The following excerpts show that while reading the reviews, participants tried to make a connection between their personality and the reviewer's personality. The readers chose to read reviews that they felt were written by someone who was similar to themselves, as shown in the excerpts below:

> *It's this again, where people might experience differently. And I also look at the profile of the people who is writing the review. Because it's very different, a comment of a single guy to the comment of the one with family, who stayed at the same hotel or at the same Airbnb. Because of the expectation. You know, a single guy would say that it was boring and very quiet, but the family man said that it was great for the kids because obviously single guys want to party or I don't know, the family wouldn't. So I read the profile of the people who are giving the review… (PG3, female, 39, single mother with a child).*

The above example of using self-congruity as participants evaluate the reviews is strengthened by a short, but on target, statement from one reviewer who had some experience in the hospitality industry:

> *… try to choose somebody who's close enough to my portrait… (R36, female, 27, single, PhD student)*

These excerpts offer clear evidence that the participants used the self-congruity concept, by which they tried to match their identity with the user of the brand (Sirgy, 2018) by utilising the reviewer's profile. By reading the profile, the participants learn about the reviewer's characteristics and their identity. They believe that people with different personal characteristics have different opinions. Therefore, they choose reviews which were written by someone with similar characteristics (i.e., social backgrounds, tastes, preferences) to their own (Racherla and Friske, 2012) because people trust "persons like themselves" (Frost, Fox and Strauss, 2018, p. 355). Their statements suggest that the behaviour of these

participants was based on a self-consistency motive, as they will only purchase a product which has an image congruent with their self-image belief (Sirgy, 1982).

Even though the above excerpt shows that profile was used to learn the reviewer's characteristics, not all participants would read the profile of the reviewer every time. However, some participants stated that they can investigate the reviewer's characteristics by reading their review carefully. It could be by the way the message was crafted; the words used, the tone of voice or the style of language, or even by the information itself. Moreover, readers of online reviews may use the message of the review as a clue about the reviewer's credibility (Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay, 2015), as shown in the following example:

> *So, if the reviews are really extreme then I tend to almost disregard them and read the ones that sound a bit more normal like the kind of thing that I would write, you know whether it's positive or negative something a bit more kind of yes, not so extreme, so I think that's my way of kind of coping with that. (R19, female, 31, single).*

As shown in the above excerpt, the participant only read reviews with a similar tone as she herself uses when writing reviews. She perceived the reviewer as credible because of the similarity of their tone to hers. This is valid as people with similar values tend to use similar language and interpret events similarly (Shen *et al.*, 2010). This corresponds with the view of some scholars that people will be able to accept other people's opinion when there is similarity between them (Byrne, Clore and Smeaton, 1986), hence consumers are more easily influenced by a reviewer who has the same self-congruity with themselves (Zhang, Wu and Mattila, 2016). Therefore, it is natural that these participants perceived the review to be credible because of the review's tone of voice or because of the reviewer's characteristics. A negative review can also be seen as credible on the basis of a reader's self-congruence with the review.

The following excerpts exemplify another way of establishing self-congruity:

> *If you see that someone travels a lot, stays in a lot of hotels, knows what's good and knows what's bad, their expectations are similar to you, they're not going to be too fussy about tiny little things, you know for example 'when I arrived the person at the front desk didn't smile' or something like that, but for example 'when I arrived there was no record of my booking' or 'I wasn't given a clear idea how to get to my room' or something like that, those are important things, so it's kind of...you do trust the reviews but as long as you trust the reviewer, as long as you understand the reviewer (R43, male, 63, married, university staff).*

Because of something that someone has recommended and that someone stayed at the same place as me, so maybe we share the same mentality, so it saves lots of time and trouble (R18, female, 31, single, PhD student).

The first example exhibits evidence of how participants use information from the review to learn about reviewer's travel behaviour and hence, his/her expectations. Based on that inference, he then makes some judgement about the review. The second example also shows how the participant uses a self-congruity strategy to judge the review. On this occasion, she used information about the reviewer's previous choice of accommodation. If they have stayed in similar accommodation, then she develops trust towards the review.

4.2.4.3 Utilising functional congruity concept

Sirgy et al. (1991, p. 364) described functional congruity as "the use of utilitarian evaluative criteria in multi-attribute attitude models (e.g., belief-evaluation model, belief-importance model, ideal-point model)". In other words, functional congruity is achieved when there is a match between the functional attributes of a destination and consumer's expectations of those attributes (Sirgy and Su, 2000). In the context of blogs as communication media, functional congruity refers to the degree of similarity between the evaluation of bloggers' functional attributes and the readers' needs (Wang *et al.*, 2015).

Functional congruity is better in predicting consumer behaviour than self-congruity, however, it is biased by self-congruity and it was therefore concluded that they complement each other in influencing consumer behaviour (Sirgy *et al.*, 1991). These researchers then suggested that self-congruity influences functional congruity and is moderated by tourists' knowledge, previous experience, involvement and time pressure (Sirgy and Su, 2000). For example, tourists with more knowledge and previous experience are more likely to engage in functional congruity processing (Johar and Joseph Sirgy, 1991). In contrast, tourists with less experience might not know the criteria to assess a destination, therefore they may rely on a more simplistic cue, such as a destination's image, and match it with their self-image (Sirgy and Su, 2000). That is probably the reason why functional congruity was being considered more by consumers when booking accommodation, especially for a business stay (Su and Reynolds, 2017). Quality of service, price, aesthetics of the place and access from public transportation are some examples of functional attributes of a destination (Sirgy and Su, 2000).

There are numerous examples of how participants considered functional congruity when they were evaluating reviews in their decision-making process. These participants scanned the reviews until they found the keywords for the characteristics that they believed to be

significant for themselves. Once they had spotted those keyword(s) in the review, they would then read the review carefully. Below are some examples of such behaviour:

> *I trust them to some extent, I mean as you probably see from what I've said earlier, what they say will be affected by what is important for them, and so I need to check if what's important for them is also important for me. (R43, male, 63, married with children).*

> *Some comments are not valuable for me because I don't think the things that they mentioned are important for me. But some of the information is very important and based on that information, I will then make the decision… I am only looking for specific things from the review. I am not a very strict person. I have a kid now, so I have a pushchair, so the first thing that I'm looking for is the safety of the place and whether the hotel has a lift or not. That is the most important thing right now and I will only look for that information (PG7, male, 30s, married with children).*

The above excerpts show that when reading a review, the participants realised that the review is someone else's opinion which could be different from their own point of view. However, as long as they can gather information about some attributes that are important for them, they will continue reading them to extract credible information which could help them in their decision-making process. As shown in the last excerpt above, the participant had already set his mind on finding specific information about the accommodation and he only read reviews which mentioned that specific information. Another example of a participant who chose reviews based on functional congruity is as follow:

> *I would prefer reviews talking about the friendliness of the receptionist, the staff, and helpful like they can give you maps and then some recommendations about restaurants and sightseeing route hopefully, and of course the comfortableness, like quietness, and also whether they have, like hotel also like breakfast is good or not because I'm a foodie, and hostel I would say whether like they have loads of social events going on, so it's a good opportunity to meet new people (PG35, female, 24, single).*

By the word 'prefer', the participant means that she had set certain functional characteristics of the accommodation that she was hoping to find when reading the reviews. Therefore, she would skim the reviews and then read carefully when she encountered reviews which mentioned her prerequisite characteristics.

Another example of the utilisation of functional congruity is when the participant decided to go back to the reviews which were written during the period of time that the participant intends to visit the accommodation, as follow:

> *We're going in June, July, so we want to know that we won't gonna be too hot, so that's our concern. We're back to our travel consultant and he said the website that's been put out by the hotel is accurate, there is no air conditioning, but it drops cool in the evening and it stays cool all night so you're not going to really be worried about that. So I checked that out on the reviews and that was right. When you try to find one that was June or July, they obviously weren't having any negative impact because they didn't have air conditioning, so you know, you sort of weigh them up. You have to sometimes weigh through lots of reviews until you find out what you're looking for (PG45, female, 65, married with children).*

By doing so, the participant has limited herself to only reading reviews within that certain period of time. Furthermore, she also has a goal of getting information about a particular subject, or a particular characteristic of the accommodation, which she thought of as important for that period of time of the year.

The adoption of self-concept and self-congruity as well as functional congruity when analysing the reviews also means that the participants can still gather valuable information from a negative review, as shown by the following excerpts:

> *I'm also thinking about what kind of person I am and what kind of person has written the review. So, if someone has left a poor review because it's a two-mile walk to the nearest pub, then to me that shouldn't be a poor review in that situation. (R44, female, 39, single).*

From the above excerpt the participant, a reviewer, was able to see some congruity between the information that was written in the review and herself. Therefore, even though the review is negative, she did not feel disturbed by it. Rather, she developed a positive perception based on that negative review. This is discussed in more depth in section 5.2.

> *Sometimes the negative comments don't bother me at all, I don't mind if the place doesn't have I don't know, Wi-Fi for example, I'm not interested in Wi-Fi, so sometimes a negative comment doesn't even matter for me (R42, female, 47, married with children, university staff).*

The above excerpt is a good example of when the participant considered self-congruity as well as functional congruity simultaneously when reading the review. The participant can

identify herself as a compatible match with the accommodation, because of the information from the review. In this case, she identified herself as an opposite personality to the reviewer and could relate to the functional attribute that the accommodation offered based on the information. This excerpt is also a perfect example of how a negative review can still benefit the participant.

Previous research have shown that self-congruity and functional congruity can be used to investigate destinations as brands (e.g. Chon, 1992; Sirgy and Su, 2000; Litvin and Goh, 2002; Beerli, Meneses and Gil, 2007; Boksberger *et al.*, 2011; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011; Ahn, Ekinci and Li, 2013; Pratt and Sparks, 2014), or to compare general travel motivation and festival motivation (Gration, Raciti and Arcodia, 2011). Additionally, they can also be used to show the degree of similarity between the evaluation of bloggers' functional attributes and the readers' needs (Wang *et al.*, 2015). This thesis has revealed that self-congruity and functional congruity can also be used in a consumer reviews setting, to further explain potential guests and reviewers' behaviour in evaluating online consumer reviews when they are in the decision-making process.

4.2.4.4 Investigating writers' characteristics

As discussed earlier, another strategy that has been used by a number of participants when they read reviews is learning about the writer's characteristics. Participants decided to do this because they needed adequate information from a "socially acceptable source" for making their decisions (Racherla and Friske, 2012, p. 557). Examples of such behaviour are as follow:

> *If there's a really bad review, I will look at the review and kind of see if the person's being genuine or they're just, you know, mouthing off because they just want someone to rant to, you know, I kind of look at what they're trying to say and whether their comments are actually valid in the sense that… A lot of people complain about the silliest things (R28, female, 24, single, PhD student).*

> *We are all aware of things like internet trolls, and I think there are review trolls as well, there are people who spend all of their time just doing negative reviews, and maybe they have no other life, maybe they're just angry about everything, so that's why you check and if you see that they're always just being negative, well you won't believe them but if you see that someone travels a lot, stays in a lot of hotels, knows what's good and knows what's bad, their expectations are similar to you, they're not going to be too fussy about tiny little things, you know for example 'when I arrived the person at the front desk didn't smile' or something like that, but for*

example 'when I arrived there was no record of my booking' or 'I wasn't given a clear idea how to get to my room' or something like that, those are important things, so it's kind of...you do trust the reviews but as long as you trust the reviewer, as long as you understand the reviewer (R43, male, 63, married, university staff).

From the above excerpts we can see that these participants tried to see beyond the negative review. They could have believed the review and formed a negative perception, but instead they made some judgement about the reviewer's personality. They assessed the kind of words that are being used and the reviewer's travel behaviour before drawing a conclusion about the reviewer. When they felt happy about the reviewer's characteristics, they would rate it as being credible and then form their perceptions. When they felt that the review was not credible, then they would just ignore it and read another review.

Below is an excerpt showing how a participant, a potential guest, used the consistency of reviews written by the reviewer as his cue for evaluating the reviewer's characteristics.

Have learned to know which reviewers to trust, and which ones are more trustworthy based on the consistency in the reviewer feedback responses. Some customers may be incentivised to write good reviews (PG41, male, 35, single, self-employed).

It is clear that this participant has a lot of experience in reading reviews. He knows that in order to be able to appropriately use reviews as his information source, he should firstly understand the reviewer's characteristics, in this case their credibility. In order to acquire that information, he would read their review history. Some participants said that sometimes, the review was written by someone who was negative in a way which was impossible to satisfy. Some participants said that they would disregard reviews from this type of reviewer and claimed that they would have more trust in a review which was written by a reviewer who has written different kind of reviews, as shown below:

To help me to interpret what they're saying, because we all make judgements very much based on things like where we came from, what we expect, you know and sometimes for example in some sites it will also show whether this person has written a lot of reviews okay, not so much for hotels but more for things like restaurants etc, somebody who's written a lot of reviews, if you can look at their history and find that they are always negative, then it means that they are only reviewing the ones that they are unhappy with, whereas if there's a range of things you can see that they're probably trying to be objective and you're more likely to trust what they say. (R43, male, 63, married with children).

The above excerpt demonstrates the fact that the participant was actively utilising the reviewer's profile to learn about their review history. He did this to form an opinion about the reviewer which would then help him to make a judgement about the review itself. He believed that by reading from a trustworthy reviewer, he would have more trustworthy information and would therefore make a better decision. Information about the reviewer's characteristics is also important to form an opinion about their preferences, as shown below:

> *Another thing to mention is you have to look at who is making, who is writing the review. Well usually there's just brief things like where they're from you know, I mean for example if you get people who have come to Britain say to visit Hadrian's Wall as I mentioned earlier, if they're from America they will have different expectations, for some of them, if they're from America and they say the room is small, it means it's probably the right size for a British person, we won't expect a massive room like we do in American hotels, and similarly you know, for example they don't usually put it up in this company but occasionally you get Japanese people putting up suggestions about hotels they've stayed at in Britain, Japanese people's standards of how clean and perfect a room is much, much higher than a British person, so thinking about my wife I might take it into account, thinking about me I don't care, so those things effect things as well (R43, male, 63, married, university staff).*

From the above excerpt we can see that the participant also learned about other important cues from the profile. As mentioned in the above excerpt, this participant used the reviewer's country of origin to make a judgement about the review. This participant clearly has rich knowledge about consumer behaviour in general. He made a comparison between consumers from three different countries and how they would have different opinions about something. Based on this knowledge, he evaluated the reviews and eventually made a judgement about the hotel.

The excerpts presented in this section support the fact that consumers investigate reviewers' characteristics to gather more information (Zhang and Hanks, 2018). The reviewers' choice of words, travel behaviour, review history, and country of origin are among the many characteristics used by participants in order to learn about the reviewers' characteristics. These participants will only continue to read the review when they feel satisfied with the reviewer's characteristics.

Some of the strategies discussed above have been studied extensively. Research has shown source credibility to be one contributing factor to consumers' perceptions about a

review's credibility and trustworthiness (Sparks and Browning, 2011). Further, reviewer characteristics affect the perceived value and the helpfulness of a review (Fang *et al.*, 2016). However, although have been applied in various instances of tourism research, the self-congruity and functional congruity concepts have never been used in a consumer review context, especially to explain the strategies used by consumers in evaluating online consumer reviews. This thesis is perhaps the first to apply such concepts in this context, offering a new application of self-identity theory in the hospitality and tourism industry.

4.2.5 Hospitality firms' evaluation of reviews

It is well established that reviews can have an impact on a hotel's performance (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Ye, Law and Gu, 2009; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Mkono and Tribe, 2016; Viglia, Minazzi and Buhalis, 2016). Therefore, hospitality firms have to conduct a careful monitoring of reviews. To make sure that the abundance of reviews will not hinder them from taking advantage of them, as happens to consumers (Chan *et al.*, 2017; Geetha, Singha and Sinha, 2017; Nan, Yang and Dou, 2017; Singh *et al.*, 2017; Park, 2018), hospitality firms must adopt a strategy in order to monitor and extract accurate information effectively.

Generally, all the firms participating in this study monitored their reviews. They believed that to ignore them was risky. Even though not everyone interviewed responds to reviews regularly, and some do not respond at all, they still monitor them regularly. They do this because the information from reviews is real and can be followed up by corrective action. Other respondents also pointed out how reviews can provide information about areas of success. This information is important as the basis of maintaining good standards as well as a basis for acknowledging the staff's achievements. The following excerpts offer some examples of such behaviour:

> *Even though I've not necessarily been responding to this feedback over the last 12 months, I still look at it, and we still put the fixes in place for things we need to fix off the back of it (H10, the owner of a 4-star country house hotel).*

> *I think it brings out so much more information, highlights so many different things, so many things that you can work on, to get to know what did we do right. It's not about making the job easier, it just that it brings so much more information that you get more involved in. To drill into the area that needs work. It's definitely useful (H5, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).*

Some businesses conducted the monitoring manually, while others, the bigger chain hotels, used software. By manually, we mean that the hotel assigned one or more dedicated members of staff to regularly monitor and report on reviews, especially if a problem was highlighted. On the other hand, the bigger chain hotels participated in this study obtained additional help by using software which they developed internally or subscribing to a service from an external company such as Review Pro, Trust You or Venue Verdict.

These companies are providing an online reputation management service by supplying their clients with guest satisfaction surveys. They also provide detailed analytics (e.g. rooms, restaurant, spa, etc.) and performance reports (Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019). By subscribing to the service, the hotels do not have to check all review sites individually, but instead the software monitors websites and compiles all reviews for them. They then receive regular email updates and analytic reports.

> *There is a very good system we got in place which is called Review Pro. It's a system where it collates all of the feedback from any sort of agent of an online portal. It gets all the feedback from them and it benchmarks us and it tells us how we have done in, for example, the cleanliness of the bedroom, service we offer in the restaurant, service we offer in the bar, breakfast experience, lunch experience, dining experience. So we do not need to go to every single review and pick out the negatives. What it tells us, it gives us the percentage and we can see how many were good and how many were bad and we pick up the bad ones and then we decide and see that 'right, what can we do differently in order to make sure this is better'. That is I feel an excellent tool we have and we work on it on a monthly basis so we pull out report on a monthly basis and I obviously discuss that with the senior team as what exactly was the feedback for the month of April, for example, May, June, that's how we collate all the information (H2, operation manager, 4-star chain hotel).*

According to the above excerpt, the hotel has been using the report provided by the company as the basis of decision making. The report helped the manager to pinpoint areas for improvement. This particular manager has a meeting every month to discuss the review report and update the hotel's strategy accordingly. Other participants said they preferred to hold a daily or weekly meeting and use the reports to make simple adjustments to their procedures, or to develop a new strategy.

Some hospitality firms who do not have access to such services collate the reviews manually and use them as a valuable information source to shape their strategies. The

following excerpt is an example of how reviews can have a direct impact on a hotel's service delivery:

> *When I read the reviews, there's always a process to look at should I change the process in what we're doing, or I will improve that. We had reviews about the cleanliness and we're thinking about getting more cleaners to do the job. So, they are useful, but if they are given to us directly, that's better (H12, business development manager, 4-star independent hotel).*

Hotels can narrow the gap between their perception of consumers' service expectations and actual consumer expectations (i.e., Gap 1 on the Service Quality Model from Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) by utilising reviews or reports. This gap exists because a company cannot translate consumer expectations correctly. It is argued that "management should know what customer wants" in order to provide service quality (Thwaites, 1999, p. 505). However, there is a difference between the company's perception and consumers' expectations arising from the company executives' misunderstanding about what features consumers think conform with good quality, what features consumers need, and how to deliver them (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985).

Before online reviews existed, hospitality firms used information from face-to-face communication, from word-of-mouth communication, or from the results of their own questionnaires. However, as some participants mentioned, this information does not always resemble actual customer expectations in the same way as information from reviews. Some interviewees even speculated about their customers' expectations and setting a high standard for their hotel. After utilising online reviews, the above-mentioned gap in the service quality model became narrower because managers were able to better understand customer expectations.

Thwaites (1999, p. 505) suggests that this gap can be caused by inadequate marketing research orientation, lack of upward communication and insufficient relationship focus. Therefore, firms are advised to analyse customer feedback on service (Song *et al.*, 2016), using focus group discussions to gain more information about customer expectations and firms' performance (Ladhari, 2008). The present study proposes that utilisation of consumer reviews can instead be used to minimise gaps in the model. Gaps can be minimised since reviews are written by customers who have stayed in the accommodation and are being read by potential consumers, so hospitality firms can access the above-mentioned information instantly. Monitoring reviews is like hearing a direct report from consumers. Moreover, based on those reviews, the expectations of potential customers are formed. By

utilising reviews, managers do not have to wait until they have held focus group discussions and interviews. Monitoring reviews therefore minimises the gaps: companies are performing active marketing research while cutting out the need for a rigid and unnecessary bottom-up communication channel, instead building a relationship with the customer.

This discussion about how online consumer reviews can minimise gaps in service quality model is interesting and novel. Even though there are many studies about service quality in the tourism and hospitality industry, there is limited research examining the relationship between online consumer reviews and service quality, especially drawing on the gap model (e.g. Song *et al.*, 2016). This is despite the fact that a UNWTO report has clearly stated that "guest reviews are about meeting expectations thus should be able to provide a quality check upon the amenities" (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2014, p. 6). Instead, most scholars in the tourism and hospitality literature are more interested in adjusting SERVQUAL towards the specific characteristics and requirements of each service industry (for example Tsaura, Chang and Yen, 2002, on the airline industry; Ekinci, Prokopaki and Cobanoglu, 2003, on island accommodation; Albacete-Sáez, Mar Fuentes-Fuentes and Javier Lloréns-Montes, 2007, on rural accommodation; Shi, Prentice and He, 2014, on casinos). Other instances include DINESERV from Stevens et al. in 1995 to specifically measure restaurant service quality and LODGSERV from Knutson et al. in 1990 for accommodation (Cheng *et al.*, 2012). This thesis' attempt to explain how consumer reviews can minimise the gaps in the service quality model is therefore an important addition to the literature.

4.3   Firms' Intervention practices and their effects.

4.3.1   The importance of providing a response

Recognising the importance of social media and its impacts on the consumer, firms and marketers have opted to participate in social media activity in order to influence customer perceptions and have been moving from "passive listening to active service intervention" (Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015, p. 627). Many marketers believe it is important to harness and manage interaction such as that displayed on consumer review websites to gain competitive advantage (Lui *et al.*, 2018). This is because the tourism industry offers intangible and perishable products which are perceived as high-risk purchases (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008), therefore firms have to encourage consumers to search for more information before making a purchasing decision (Hu and Kim, 2018).

As a part of their engagement behaviour, consumers in the hospitality industry tend to leave a review, which should be responded to by hospitality firms (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013). It

has been proven as an effective way to improve reputation (Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019), especially among non-customers (i.e., potential consumers, potential guests) (Dijkmans, Kerkhof and Beukeboom, 2015). Moreover, online reputation management can benefit hotels financially, and through improved customer relationships and customer-based brand (Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019).

In line with the results from various studies mentioned above, most participants from the hotel respondent group stated similar motivations. These participants admitted that they intervened in consumer reviews because they wanted to take ownership of and responsibility for the problem, they appreciate the guest feedback, they want to establish customer and staff engagement, and they want to demonstrate care by making apologies and putting the record straight where necessary, as mentioned bellow:

> First of all, to apologise and show empathy to the people and just to set the record straight. We have a PR function; we have to kind of show to everyone that we are responsible, and we are dealing with it. To maintain the loyalty of people (H4, general manager, 2-star chain hotel).

> For the ones that we think were unfair, it's more to put our case across, so it isn't just a one-sided argument (H9, general manager, 3-star independent hotel).

These motivations point to one primary objective: to create and maintain their hotel's online reputation. These participants believe that by giving the right response, especially to a negative review, they can prevent negative perceptions and building the hotel's positive reputation:

> If a person has left a negative review, if you respond to it in the right manner, I think you get the opportunity to get them back. I think if it's negative and you don't respond to it or you don't respond to it in the right manner, then you're unlikely will win that customer back (H7, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

The excerpt presented above shows the participant's confidence in their ability to retain customers by providing a good response. The literature states that a managerial response could reduce the impact of a negative review and increase the impact of a positive review (Xie, Zhang and Zhang, 2014). This could be achieved by offering an apology in a way that made the participant feel respected, which can turn dissatisfaction into loyalty (Pantelidis, 2010). Furthermore, an effective response management strategy to a positive review can also create a competitive advantage (Lui *et al.*, 2018) and affects online reputation,

customer satisfaction and customer revisits. Utilisation of consumer reviews has enabled hospitality businesses to understand customer expectations so they can improve their service quality (Torres, Adler and Behnke, 2014; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018), and reduce the number of negative reviews. Moreover, since responding to reviews portrays firms' policy and service delivery (which has become more closely matched with consumers' expectations), it can contribute to minimising the gap. More discussion about this can be found in section 6.3.1.

According to some participants, responding to a negative review is very important because it provides an opportunity to maintain positive perceptions about their hotel, which otherwise would not be possible. One account from a hotel group participant emphasised this as follow:

> *A negative review has to be turned around to a positive and if that means that I have to give away a room, you know, for a night, just to say sorry, then I would do that. I think there were two on there that I've actually said call me, but they never have, so – but I'm more than happy. When I say that, I genuinely mean it. Give me a call and I'll, I will try and resolve (H11, general manager, 3-star independent boutique hotel).*

The participant in the above excerpt was willing to offer some compensation to the reviewer in order to maintain his hotel's reputation. According to this manager, he has made similar offers in his response several times but unfortunately no one has contacted him to claim the compensation. Therefore, he does not know whether this initiative has been successful in improving the reviewer's perception of the hotel. However, he hoped that his response could at least prevent other potential guests from forming a negative perception of the hotel.

It was apparent that some hotels have different procedures regarding responding to complaints. Some interviewees noted that reception staff are given the freedom to handle complaints straight away. They could give a discount or provide a free stay without having to consult with their supervisor or manager. Others stated that the decision to give a discount or freebies has to come from managerial staff, therefore, complaint handling is done in several steps. A similar approach is also taken regarding complaints in online reviews. These participants have conducted service recovery strategies which include apologising (Lewis and McCann, 2004; Jung and Seock, 2017), offering compensation (Wirtz and Mattila, 2004) and asking the customer to voice their concerns in order to gain their forgiveness (Harrison-Walker, 2018) and maintain the firm's online reputation (Liu and Law, 2018).

The importance of maintaining a hotel's online reputation, as well as firms' tendency to give more consideration to negative reviews, was consistently observed in the data. This tendency corresponds with the literature saying that managers prioritise and put additional effort into responding to easy to digest reviews, as well as negative and long reviews (Liu and Law, 2018). The emphasis on negative reviews could be attributed to the fact that such responses have more effect than responses to positive reviews (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013). Although Wei et al. (2013) claim that responding to positive reviews is equally important to responding to negative reviews, the interviews revealed that hospitality firms put more effort into responding to negative reviews, as observed from the following example:

> I think it's more important to reply to the negative reviews. We try to reply to as many as we possibly can, but it is time consuming then I say that I also do lots of other things. And sometimes I'm waiting for other information from you know, we'll be investigating something when someone says this happened, we will look into it. And sometimes we can't get to the bottom of it. So generally, our aim is to reply to as many as we possibly can. But I would probably go to the negative ones first, to try to give them a response that makes sense to the people reading the reviews (H3, marketing manager, 4-star independent boutique hotel).

Putting more emphasis on negative reviews could also be attributed to hotels' efforts to maximise their limited resources. The above excerpt shows that when hotels are faced with limited resources (e.g., workforce, time, and budget), responding to every review is not possible. Therefore, responding to negative reviews became the hotel's priority. Though the manager stated that she has tried to respond to all reviews, most of the time she was not able to and had to deal with the negative reviews as a priority.

As stated in section 4.2.1.1, many consumers go to review websites to find information about hotels. They search according to specific keywords and the dates of their intended visit and the website then provides them with a list of hotels which match their preferences. The hotels who participated in this study mostly believed that consumers evaluate hotels based on that list. They believe that the hotels near the top of the list have a greater chance of capturing consumers' attention and interest. Therefore, it is essential to have a good ranking as stated by one participant below:

> Responding to reviews help to raise the profile, liking the review whether it's a good one or not, so you just press like, it helps racked your ranking as well. It's purely because the quicker you respond the better your rating is. That's it. That's what

TripAdvisor encourages you to do in order to have your ranking better (H6, general manager, 4-star boutique hotel).

This finding corresponds to the literature arguing that besides being effective for online reputation management, firms' interventions can also increase the score of a product or service (Liu and Law, 2018), which is beneficial for the hotel's ranking. The ranking is so important for the hotels that many of them collaborate with TripAdvisor to have more reviews collected, which is a significant determinant of the ranking itself (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). According to the above excerpt, there are a couple of things that hospitality firms can do to push their ranking upward: responding promptly as well as pressing the like button, which was also confirmed by one reviewer who participated in the study:

I'm thinking that's quality interaction versus the one that doesn't say anything. It doesn't have to be very long, because I think some of them, some of these websites allow the responder to just give a tick or a thumbs up or something, and even those I think are more useful than absolutely zero response (R27, male, 38, married with children, doctor).

Besides confirming that a single action such as pressing 'like' or giving a 'thumbs up' could create a positive perception within a consumer's mind, the above excerpt also underlined the importance of responding. The participant claimed that hospitality firms should avoid giving no response because it creates a negative image of the hotel. Displaying no response can be interpreted as a lack of effort in giving their customers the appropriate level of care, which then leads to negative feelings (McColl-Kennedy and Sparks, 2003).

Another participant from the hotel group stressed the importance of being at the top of the list because not only does it attract leisure guests, it also attracts business guests who also use reviews in their decision-making process when booking venues for meetings or functions.

As part of their booking tool and venue selection, they will use TripAdvisor even though it's a subjective leisure focus type. But they'll still use it as criteria whether they book their event with us or not. And that is critical for us. People's habits have definitely changed, so it's important that we get our responses right, really (H7, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

According to this participant, even though the majority of reviewers and consumers who read reviews are leisure type consumers, some business customers have also used reviews to

inform themselves about the hotel's service quality level. Business customers are important to most hotels because they contribute significantly to revenue. Most participants claimed that they have a 70:30 mix of customers. 70 per cent of their customers are business customers, who stay during the week for business purposes, while the other 30 per cent are leisure customers, who mostly stay during weekends and holidays.

Besides individual customers who stay in the hotel for business purposes, another type of business customer is organisations. These companies book hotels for meetings or as a conference venue. When having a meeting, a conference or any other event in a hotel, companies also book rooms for the event's participants. Besides spending money on rooms, these companies also spend a considerable amount of money on food and beverages. Therefore, hotels gain additional income from breakfast, lunch and dinner because usually, the participants from an event choose to stay at the hotel during the whole period of the event. Hotels also earn income from coffee breaks.

Hence, it is not an exaggeration to say that attracting these organisations is very important for hotels. Providing a response to reviews has therefore become essential because it enables hotels to be nearer the top of the list, which is used by consumers (individuals as well as business) as their information source. Even though the research did not necessarily investigate the type of hotels in the study, based on the above information that the majority of guests staying in the hotel are business customers, it can be concluded that most hotels in the study are convention hotels (Kim, Cho and Brymer, 2013). A full-service hotel "provides a wide variety of facilities and amenities, including food and beverage outlets, meeting rooms, and recreational amenities" (Xu and Li, 2016, p. 59). However, most hotels in the study only provide some of these facilities, therefore they can be grouped as limited-service hotels. For example, some hotels do not provide a swimming pool.

4.3.2 Hospitality Firms' Practice of Responding

4.3.2.1 Investigation before responding

Further discussion about the persuasive message and the source of message, as well as the discussion about the timing of response, are presented in the next section. However, in order to be able to give accurate information in their response, most participants from hospitality firms stressed the need to do some investigation. After making sure that they have established the correct information, these participants then proceed with the process of crafting a persuasive message, by an appropriate source, at the right time. The following excerpts offer some examples of such behaviour:

It's important to me that you do investigate it because that's how you learn, that's how you drive improvement (H1, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

If it's a specific complaint, we're trying to investigate the customer and see what happened and why and can we do anything to stop it from happening again or do we not think it was actually you know, a fair complaint (H3, marketing manager, 4-star independent boutique hotel).

Besides getting the correct information that they could present in the message; this investigation has also enabled hotels to make some improvements to their service. After acquiring some information about the cause of service failure, they could suggest some strategies to improve it. By doing so, these participants from hotel group also gained a better understanding of their customers' expectations, resulting in their ability to deliver better service quality (discussed in section 4.2.2.1), as mentioned in the following example:

Say that the customer knows that we've seen that they've taken their time to leave the review, we've read it, we've understood it, we've acknowledged it, we apologize where necessary and we do something about it (H7, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

The above excerpt shows the content of a typical hospitality firms' response as well as the process that some participants conducted every time they acquire a review. Before responding, the participants investigate it in order to be able to understand it. Once they have understood the concerns raised in the review, these participants then acknowledge it. Depending on the result of their investigation, they can include an apology in the message and their plan to rectify the problem, and/or end it with an explanation of what they think had happened. This is also referred to as the "Triple A" typology: acknowledgement of the dissatisfying event, an account (explanation) of its occurrence and a reference to action taken (Sparks and Bradley, 2014).

4.3.2.2 Crafting a persuasive message

As a marketing communications effort, the response should be able to persuade and inform consumers - directly or indirectly - about the brands they sell (Keller, 2001, p. 819). For the response to be effective and achieve those goals, hospitality firms should assign an appropriate source and craft appropriate message content or argument quality (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann, 1983; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). When effective, the response should be able to change its audience's (e.g., reviewer and potential consumer) perceptions for the better.

When hospitality firms respond by exercising the triple-A typology (acknowledgement, account, and action) concerning the information from the investigation, they are able to provide a personalised message in every response. Furthermore, most participating consumers (i.e., reviewers and potential guests) also agree that the response should be personalised and claim that a standard message creates a negative perception. If hotels use a standard message, some participants perceive them as not engaging and most importantly, they perceive it as a signal that the management is choosing to ignore the problem even though they have been made aware of it. It creates an uncaring image and forms distrust among participants, as shown below:

> *I think they just want to cover up their image, but they don't actually do something to improve. I will assume that they don't care about the customer. They've read the review, but they don't do something about it (PG13, female, 24, master student).*

Because of these negative perceptions associated with standard messages, some participants further suggest that companies would do better to provide no response. The following is one such example:

> *Would even prefer that they don't send me anything at all than send me an automatic message because it's stupid, so just leave me alone let me be, so instead of just pretending that you care about me whereas you're just shooting a message that you've generated in the past without considering my particular experience (R22, male, 36, married with children, PhD student).*

The above excerpt shows how the participant, a reviewer, felt irritated when he received a standard message from the hotel. He perceived the hotel to be deceitful, not paying attention to his problem and not giving any consideration to his situation. In other words, by providing a standard message, the participant perceives the hotel to be demonstrating a lack of effort in following up on his review. Again, displaying lack of effort suggests that the service provider does not care, which can lead to consumers' negative feelings (McColl-Kennedy and Sparks, 2003).

However, it should also be noted that to give a personalised message to every review is a challenge for firms. This is especially so since there are many similar experiences presented on review websites, which meant that some responses were also similar. The following is an excerpt from one hotel participant who explained his struggle in creating a personalised response for every review:

Sometimes the reviews kind of repeat themselves a bit so you kind of reply also in a repetitive way but you try to not repeat in the same sentence all the time, saying the same thing over and over because then it loses its impact as well. You try to show that you respond to each review individually, definitely, but it's difficult sometimes (H4, general manager, 2-star chain hotel).

Nevertheless, as shown in the above excerpt, the participant decided to provide a personalised message because it has more impact than the standard message. Most participants from the hotel group tried to give a personalised response because they wanted to show a good level of care to their customers, as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

I do try and put myself in the reviewers' shoes. Do you want an impersonal bland reply that really indicates that you're not really that bothered about what I've said, or do you want to try and specifically tailor a more personal empathetic, sympathetic reply? (H1, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

You can respond via template as well, but we don't really do that. We prefer to make a personalized response and think a generic response is only a waste of time (H7, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).

The above excerpts show that most participants from the hotel group are aware that a standard response suggests that hotels are not concerned about reviews and consider responding a waste of their resources. Therefore, as the excerpts suggest, the participants decided to give a personalised empathetic response. Furthermore, regarding the challenge in crafting a personalised message, one participant demonstrated an excellent example of how she managed to do so:

I kind of mirrored on what the guest has said. So, if they're really bubbly or if you have an impression that they are quite young, I feel that I should respond differently while some people will write quite formally. I feel that I have to reflect that, so I varied with the way that the guest has written it and if it's quite a lengthy complaint then I'll try to address every point, if it's quite short and sweet then I just say thank you blablabla. I very much reflect on how the guest has written and the word that they've used. If they said something was excellent then I will say... I used what they've said and put it in my response, so they understand that I've read their response and it just mirrors (H8, guest relation officer, 4-star chain hotel).

The above excerpt shows that before even writing any words, the participant tried to assess the reviewer's characteristics in order to form a suitable message for that particular reviewer. She tried to use the same language and style as used by the reviewer. She also tried to

address every point raised by the reviewer which was a good decision because a specific management response can be more effective than a generic response (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013). This effort from the participant, to create a conversational communication with the reviewer (as well as with other audiences), could lead to the development of para-social interaction. Para-social interaction is a term coined by Horton and Wohl which refers to a new form of social interaction (Levy, 1979) where the audience feels like they are having an actual interaction with the source of communication in the mass media (Daniel, Crawford Jackson and Westerman, 2018). Establishing para-social interaction is important because it can influence the audience's attitude and behaviour (Thorson and Rodgers, 2006).

Even though not every hotel participant made the extra effort like the above participant, most claimed that they try to provide a personalised response. They believed that a personalised message has more chance of influencing their customers. That explains why they were willing to put in the extra effort even though providing a personalised message to each response was a challenge. Moreover, some of them were also aware that the reviewer was not their only target audience for the response. In fact, some admitted that they made the response in order to gain attention from potential guests rather than the reviewers themselves, as mentioned below:

> It is partly about talking to the next customer. One is saying sorry to the one if they have been upset, but also it is about saying to the next person who comes 'if you have any issue with it, let us know and we'll sort it' (H3, marketing manager, 4-star independent boutique hotel).

The above excerpt shows one participant's strategy of targeting the message at potential guests. Because of this realisation, some participants have inserted marketing communication messages when responding to reviews which was acknowledged and also supported by some participants from the potential guest group:

> Some others reply, however, not only that they acknowledge the reviewer's problem, but they also want to send a message to other people who also read the message. Like for example, there's a review about the breakfast time on a hotel and the hotel only give the standard response, to call them. It is better if they give an explanation on the response about their breakfast hours so that other customer or potential customer who may have the same question will also know the fact (PG16, male, 27, PhD student).

> *The customer is unlikely to return, and the promise is unlikely to be adhered to – in fact it's quite ineffective marketing since I think they need to be focussing on general customers rather than on one individual (PG41, male, 35, self-employed).*

These potential guest participants suggested that firms should craft their messages not only for the reviewer but also for other potential guests. The first participant raised an important point about how potential customers read reviews and their responses, indicating that they should provide relevant information about the hotel. Rather than providing a standard response asking the reviewer to call the hotel, this participant suggested that it would be better if the hotel gave a detailed explanation regarding the matter so that other readers (i.e., potential guests) could learn from it. The second participant raised the fact that the reviewer might not come back to stay at the hotel again, suggesting that hospitality firms provide a message which targets a broader audience.

These opinions correspond with the literature claiming that as a medium that enables firms to engage with their customers, responses present an opportunity for firms to provide rich information (Proserpio and Zervas, 2017). This information could then inform the consumer's decision-making process. Since the majority of participants from the hotel group were also aware of this, they decided to insert some kind of promotional message in their response:

> *We take each review, positive review as an opportunity to promote something else, the next you know, 'do come back and see us when you're next in the area, check our website for special accommodation offers'. We use the reviews as an opportunity to broadcast the fact that we are responsive, and sometimes a bit of self-help wouldn't go amiss, but there we are. We turn it into a sales opportunity. Everyone is an opportunity, absolutely you know, it's free advertising (H12, business development manager, 4-star independent hotel).*

> *That really fits the part of the marketing strategy, it's about maximising your visibility and availability to the widest possible market at all time (H1, general manager, 4-star chain hotel).*

Besides inserting appropriate information to respond to the review, these participants also put marketing messages in their responses. They put information about a particular promotion, or simply invited the reviewer or potential customer to come (back) to the hotel. This decision was based on the participants' conviction that responding to reviews also creates awareness among consumers which could be used as an opportunity to create sales.

Based on the findings, we have learned that providing a personalised response, especially for a negative review, is a good strategy for hospitality firms. The response should be persuasive and establish para-social interaction with the audience (Thorson and Rodgers, 2006), as seen in an example from one hotel participant above. This finding corresponds with some scholars' view that a response should not be generic and should demonstrate the hotel's awareness of the message, by paraphrasing the problem (Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015). The response should acknowledge the problem, explain how it occurred, and describe a future action plan to resolve the problem. Hospitality firms should also consider the broader audience when responding to reviews. Inserting marketing communication messages, especially ones that are beneficial to potential guests, is encouraged.

4.3.2.3 Assigning a persuasive source

The second thing to consider regarding a persuasive message is the source factor. Some participants from the consumer group (i.e., reviewers and potential guests) have made various suggestions regarding the source of the response:

> *If somebody replies on behalf of an institution or organisation or accommodation, I don't think it matters who that person is, as long as they represent that organisation reasonably. Politely, fairly, I don't think it matters what their position is, whether the manager or the lady at reception, really doesn't matter (R4, female, 50s, married, university staff).*

According to this excerpt, the participant did not have any preference for the source of the response. She claimed that as long as it comes from a legitimate person in the hotel, their job title does not matter. Anyone in the organisation could give a response. However, she stressed that the response should be polite and fair. This participant paid more attention to the message than to the source of the message. Another opinion is as follows:

> *I just think if the person's in a senior position they're more likely to be able to act on whatever they read. So if they read something where someone's absolutely really complaining and they're horrified and they're, you know, it's a really horrible review, that person, if they're in a senior position, is more likely to be able to say can you send me an email and we'll sort this out and I don't know, give them a refund or whatever. Whereas if it's somebody who's less senior, they haven't got the authority, necessarily, to do anything particularly useful to help it (R23, female, 30, single, PhD student).*

Unlike the previous participant, this participant prefers to see a response from someone with a senior position. The reason for this preference is because she thinks someone in a senior

position has the authority to take action to address the issue raised in the review. The critical element of a source based on this excerpt is the ability to act on the review. Another opinion on the source of response is as follows:

> *So, for me, if those people respond, it's fine for me. If the managers respond, it's fine. So, I won't tend to say I would believe things that comes only from the managers, from that response, from the cleaners. I tend to take everything because I tend to think that the people who deal with you every day, like not the managers, let's say the support staff have more experience in day to day running of the facility (R26, female, 35, married with children, PhD student).*

The above participant stated that she does not have any preference about a source and that she would believe the message regardless of the source. However, she stressed the importance of the interaction with customers. Therefore, she does not mind if a response comes from support staff because based on her observation, support staff have more interaction with customers than managers do. Furthermore, regarding the staff as the source of response, there was an interesting opinion from another participant as follows:

> *If it came from the staff, I think I would feel a little bit guilty because I know that they're not ultimately responsible for the running of the place. If it's the organisation or the manager, I suppose I'd feel that they're the one who got the power to change things so if they're saying that they're gonna change things that's great but if it's just a standard response, I feel like they probably aren't very aware of what conditions are like because to remove from it. I don't think it would make a massive difference in how I felt really (R8, female, 29, single, university staff).*

Interestingly, even though the above participant claimed that the source of response did not have any effect for her, and that she would have the same perception regardless of the source, she also admitted to having an uncomfortable feeling when she sees a response written by a member of staff. Furthermore, she added that the source of response should be someone responsible for the hotel. This participant stressed the importance of responsibility in a source. These findings show that participants have different opinions regarding what they consider to be an appropriate source for responding to reviews. This suggests that the safest choice would be to assign a person who is able to make improvements and has some responsibility and involvement in the daily operations of the hotel.

4.3.2.4 The timing of the response

The literature has suggested that a timely response is essential to preventing negative impacts from a complaint while improving brand evaluation (van Noort and Willemsen, 2011;

Lui *et al.*, 2018). Thus, managers need to conduct a service recovery initiative promptly (Browning, So and Sparks, 2013). However, other scholars argue the opposite by claiming that the speed of response did not have any influence on their participants' rating of the response (Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015). The following excerpts convey the opinions of this study's participants about the timing of response:

> *The quicker the better. It's purely because the quicker you respond the better your rating is (H6, general manager, 4-star boutique hotel).*

This hotel manager was concerned about getting to the top of the list as described earlier in the chapter. According to her experience, faster responses contributed to a better rating; therefore, she has a policy of responding within 72 hours.

> *I think it would certainly give an impression of how quickly they are viewing it, obviously, shows how dedicated they are in who is actually checking their quality and taking feedback. Faster is the better but I also understand that if it's a very small busy hotel, that doesn't have a dedicated team to read online and it's just one man or two people who are running the hotel, it's difficult to read the reviews but as I say, if they're fast to read the reviews, it is maybe because they don't have so many rooms. Maybe it's just a ten-room hotel. You know, the small budget hotels. They could actually do something about it (PG29, male, 40s, single, PhD student).*

> *I normally check that also. I will check the gap between the review and the reply because then I can see if the hotel really cares about the customer or not. And whether they really want to improve their quality or not. This example here shows that the hotel replied after 2 months, I think it's too late. I think 1 to 2 weeks is acceptable. 2 months is too long, it means that they are taking too much time to improve their quality, it means we can't rely on them (PG13, female, 24, single, master student).*

These participants confirmed the need for a faster response because it gives an impression about the hospitality firms' level of care. Hotels who give a faster response are perceived to be taking their customer's problem very seriously (van Noort and Willemsen, 2011). Nevertheless, the first participant also understands that some firms might have limited resources which makes giving a fast response unmanageable. The second participant also stated the time limit which she thought to be acceptable. Another participant emphasised that recovery should be made as soon as possible because the longer it takes, the more dissatisfied the complainer would be:

This didn't seem relevant to me, but I'm sure it would have been for the customer. 48 hours is a long wait if they weren't happy (PG41, male, 35, single, self-employed).

On the contrary, based on his point of view as a potential guest, the timing of a response did not have any impact on him. He was not even aware of the timing. Most participants shared this view and do not bother to check the response timing.

Based on the findings in this section, it is better for hospitality firms to respond promptly. Some participants from the consumer group suggested 48 hours. For others, from 72 hours up to two weeks was an acceptable time period for responding. A prompt response is better for the hotel's ranking and contributes to a positive image of its level of care, especially among those who give some consideration to this. It would be a misfortune if these potential guests developed a negative perception because the hotel delayed the response time by a couple of days.

4.3.3 Various Effects of Hospitality Firms' Interventions

Extant research has indicated that hospitality firms' interventions in the form of responses to online consumer reviews are an effective way to improve reputation (Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019). Scholars also suggest that maintaining interaction with consumers will allow hospitality firms to gain a competitive advantage (Lui *et al.*, 2018) as well as achieve customer satisfaction and customer revisits (Liu and Law, 2018). Some researchers have suggested that reviewers may not expect a direct online response (Sparks and Bradley, 2014; Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015). Therefore, hospitality firms' response could negatively influence their perceptions (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013).

Furthermore, as has been previously stated, consumers have different "memory banks" (Gregory, 1972, p. 708). Therefore, it is not surprising that the participants in this study formed different perspectives and had different responses to hospitality firms' interventions. Based on the data from the interviews, there are several different types of effects caused by a hotel's response to readers (i.e., consumers; potential guests and reviewers), including positive, neutral and negative effects. To describe an effect as neutral implies it does not change readers' behaviour; the participants reported that there was no difference between their behaviour before and after reading the response. This section presents these findings as well as additional findings about the impact of no response and standard response. The discussion about positive impact is presented first, as it represents the most popular opinion among participants, followed by neutral and negative impact.

4.3.3.1 Positive perception

The majority of participants, both from the reviewer and potential guest groups, expressed the view that firms' interventions have created a positive effect for them as consumers. This positive effect takes the form of a positive perception about the hotel that has responded to the review. Positive perception includes attributing importance to the feedback, being aware of the problem, caring and engaging with the consumers, and improving their satisfaction. Some participants also reported that they had changed their perception after reading the response because providing a response is perceived as being respectful towards the reviewer, as exemplified in the following excerpt:

> …to some extent because at least it shows that the hotel is giving importance to the feedback and they try to improve themselves or the hotel, by addressing the comment, especially if they are saying something like 'okay we are aware of the problem and we are working on that', if they make some kind of comment like this then at least it shows that they are aware of what's going on, which gives unpleasantness to the tourists, and they are trying to sort out the problem, so I think it's a good thing, it kind of adds to my stance to the hotel (PG39, male, 35, married, PhD student).

As shown in the above excerpt, responding to a review sent a positive signal to the reader. The participant reported that the response had given him more assurance about the hotel, especially when it demonstrated intent to address the problem. He accepted the fact that the hotel had some problems. However, a hotel's intent to make improvements appears to be more important to participants:

> It does show that the hotel really cares so, it really takes the time to check the reviews to reply to these reviews, but this doesn't give the guarantee that it would do these things to address the problem (PG31, female, 26, married, PhD student).

The above excerpt presents a slightly different opinion from the last one. Unlike the previous participant, this person has some doubts about the hotel's intention to make improvements. However, a response has given her an impression about the level of care that the hotel has for its customers. This participant also stressed the fact that checking out the reviews and responding to them is an effort which requires significant resources from the hotel. Therefore, by responding, it has given her a positive signal. Another positive perception brought about by firms' response is shown in the following excerpt:

> At least you know that the company is engaging in this process. It means that they're going beyond process. It's not simply a reactive process to the situation they

are actually taking bit of time to help somebody that has paid for their product
(PG47, male, 49, married, university staff).

The above excerpt shows that after reading the response, the participant who is a potential guest, has a positive perception about the hotel because they engaged and helped their customers.

Normally, I am not expecting a response from the hotel. If they take the time to do it, well, that's great! That speaks well about them. I'm not expecting them to reply back to me (R32, female, 30, single, PhD student).

This reviewer claimed that she was not expecting a response from the hotel. Her motivation for writing the review was purely to inform other potential guests. A positive perception was formed when she was aware of the hotel management's response.

Yes, it was definitely changed my perception. You feel that you are being respected by the person because they are taking care of the problem that they had. They are apologising which is a quite nice thing to do rather than not saying anything or ignoring you. When they ignore you, you feel that you are not important to them as a customer. I think it's always good to get a reply (R11, female, 30, married, PhD student).

The above excerpt exemplifies an opposing opinion from a reviewer. Unlike the previous reviewer, this person was expecting the hotel to respond to her review, which was a complaint. The response she received made her change her previous negative perception about the hotel because they successfully assured her that they were going to take care of the problem. Furthermore, the hotel also apologised in a way that made the participant feel respected. Therefore, based on the last excerpt, we can conclude that a hotel's response can successfully turn dissatisfaction into loyalty (Pantelidis, 2010). The participant also added that the absence of a response would make her feel unimportant because the hotel had ignored her and her review.

The positive effect can be grouped into the enhancement of (positive) online reputation and consumer satisfaction improvement. These correspond to the findings from previous research stating that management of response could reduce the effect of unfavourable reviews and enhance the effect of favourable ones on hotel performance (Xie, Zhang and Zhang, 2014; Xie, Kwok and Wang, 2017). Additionally, an effective response management strategy would create a competitive advantage (Lui *et al.*, 2018) and affects online

reputation, customer satisfaction and consumer revisits (Liu and Law, 2018). Further, responding to reviews can also turn dissatisfaction into loyalty (Pantelidis, 2010).

4.3.3.2 Negative perception

Another consequence of hospitality firms' intervention identified by this study is negative perception, which was mainly caused by the lack of attention to the issues reported by reviewers. A negative perception is also caused by an inappropriate attitude in presenting the argument, as suggested by the participant below:

> *I remember reading one hotel which, who had replied but who I felt hadn't addressed the concerns of the person who had stayed there, and then that made me think that I wouldn't wish to stay there if the customer service ethos was not to try and be helpful (PG25, female, 38, married, doctor).*

As the above excerpt shows, it is imperative to address every concern that the reviewer mentioned in the review. When hospitality firms fail to do that, a negative perception about the service ethos is formed and the participant shows no interest in staying in the accommodation, as shown below:

> *If you're trying to argue with them or if you're trying to explain excuses, I don't think it's good. It will leave an even more negative image of the hotel. Because it appears to me that the hotel is quite arrogant (PG10, male, 28, single, PhD student).*

This excerpt highlights another kind of negative impact which forms when the hotel tries to argue with the reviewer. This example underlines the importance of providing a personalised message, as discussed in section 4.3.2.2. Presenting an argument with an adequate explanation is a common practice in responding to a review. However, when the hotel argues with every point addressed by the reviewer without trying to acknowledge the problem, it creates the wrong impression and can result in a negative perception of the hotel, as shown in the above excerpt. According to some participants, an arrogant response is the worst kind of response and should be avoided at all times. It is preferable not to respond at all, as indicated below:

> *The worst thing is when they response arrogantly. You can have no response, but you cannot treat your customer very poorly in your response (PG10, male, 28, single, PhD student).*

Based on the findings discussed in this section, businesses should take extra care when responding to reviews. They should pay considerable attention to the reviews and make

sure that they have addressed every point mentioned in the reviews. Hospitality firms should also be very careful in choosing their tone of voice and avoid being arrogant. This kind of response can result in negative perceptions about the service if it is seen as a disturbance by consumers (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). Consumers can interpret an explanation as an excuse which exacerbates negative perceptions of the company (Tax, Brown and Chandrashekaran, 1998; Mattila, 2006; Lee and Cranage, 2014).

4.3.3.3 No change in perception

Some participants reported that they do not form any perception or do not change their perception as a consequence or a response to a review. This situation occurs because the participants, especially the ones from the potential guest group, tend to give more consideration to the review itself. Meanwhile, some participants from the reviewer group do not expect any response (Sparks and Bradley, 2014; Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015) and mainly consider the service experience that they had as the primary factor in forming an opinion about a hotel:

> I won't even consider it. Because they should do that on the spot [when the complaint takes place], not after that. I don't even continue discussing the issue because they didn't try to fix it on the spot, so it means nothing to me (R20, male, 30, married, PhD student).

The above excerpt indicates that the presence of a response did not have any effect on this participant. The participant, a reviewer, felt strongly that the hotel should resolve the complaint during the stay, or when he made a direct complaint to the hotel. The participant wrote the review because he did not receive a satisfactory resolution to his complaint. For this participant, the hotel lost the chance to form a positive perception when it failed to offer excellent service recovery to the participant at the point of complaint. This example shows the importance of a good service recovery initiative in order to prevent a negative review which could be harder to put right. The following is another example of how a response created no change in a participant's perception:

> For me it's not an important enough factor, I'm much more interested in whether I really like the place, if I really like the place and had a great stay there then maybe I would go back but I'm really not that bothered about whether they reply (R19, female, 31, single, PhD student).

The excerpt above, given by a reviewer, stresses the importance of service quality. The participant stated that the most critical factor for her return decision is the service quality that she experienced on her previous visit. Any response or the absence of a response from the

hotel to her review does not change her previous perception about it. Therefore, hospitality firms should pay attention to providing the best service quality to their customers in order to create a positive perception in the first instance. This is because, as shown by these first two excerpts, the reviewers' first impression is hard to change and is the primary consideration for their return decision. A slightly different account from another participant is as follow:

> *Doesn't matter. If they can take some action, it will send me the message that the people in the hotel are monitoring the reviews and they have a standard and they are trying to improve it, but it will not change my decision in choosing the hotel. So, if I want to book a hotel and I read the reviews about the hotel. My decision to book the hotel will not change because of the reply from the hotel alone (PG7, male, 30s, married with children, PhD student).*

The above excerpt shows a slightly different case. Even though the response has created a positive perception, the participant, a potential guest, admitted that it did not change his decision when booking a hotel. He stated that he made a decision after reading the reviews and the response does not change that decision. This demonstrates the fact that the participant gave greater consideration to the reviews than the response, which is also shown in the following excerpt:

> *I would still look for reviews after this response and see if the hotel has improved their service or not. The reply alone won't change my perception immediately (PG13, female, 24, single, master student).*

The above excerpt highlights the practice of reading more reviews after reading the response. The participant still needs to double check the response against the rest of the reviews. Even though she reads the response, this participant gives more consideration to the reviews when forming her perception about a hotel. In conclusion, even though these participants are aware of and read the response, it does not have such an impact on them. They place greater weight on the reviews. For other participants, hospitality firms' responses had no impact at all because they decided to skip them.

These findings relating to the neutral effect of firms' interventions would enrich the literature because research has not considered the presence of this type of effect. This thesis acknowledges the fact that consumers are not bipolar: between the positive and negative effects. There can also be a neutral effect. However, the existing literature only recognises the contradictory effects of firms' responses: they are either positive or negative.

4.3.3.4 Responses are perceived as companies' defence mechanism

Another finding observed from the data is that some participants perceived the response to a review as a defensive action from the hospitality firms, as described here:

> *They find a roundabout way to appease the customer and avoid all the other readers like myself from making a wrong conclusion. So, it's just a way to do damage control, most times. I wouldn't say all cases but in the majority of cases it's like, damage control only, especially if it's a negative comment (PG24, female, 31, single, PhD student).*

According to the potential guest, a hotel's response is mostly an explanation from the management in order to prevent a negative perception from readers. This participant commented that the hotel would never give a straightforward confirmation about the issue and would never admit the service error as their responsibility. Hence this participant perceived the response as a form of damage control. Similar views were also expressed by another potential guest:

> *Of course, the hotel will want to make sure the customer is reassured, and they will do their best to just make sure like… they will talk very well and, you know, be like, "No, we'll do our sort of best to improve it in any way we can" but it's not hundred percent sure they will do it (PG31, female, 26, married, PhD student).*

The above excerpt presents an example of how hotels usually end the explanation. According to this participant, even after reading an explanation which ended with a promise of improvement from the hotel's management, she still has some doubts. In contrast, the participant from the previous excerpt stated that there is a possibility that some hotels might genuinely make the improvement that they promised in the response. However, consumers' perception that the response is a defence mechanism that the hotel has to deploy for every negative review is prevalent. Both participants above doubted firms' intention to make improvements. These participants see hotels' explanations as excuses which create a negative perception of the company (Tax, Brown and Chandrashekaran, 1998; Mattila, 2006; Lee and Cranage, 2014).

4.3.3.5 Effect of a standard response

Another interesting finding regarding the impacts of responses to reviews is that firms should be discouraged from offering a standard response. According to some participants, a standard response made them think that the hotel does not care because despite knowing that a problem existed, they decided not to do anything about it. Therefore, providing a

standard response could be more detrimental than giving no response, especially to a negative review:

> *When I saw the reply from them, it was kind of mix. On one side, it was good that they had read it and had bothered to respond. But on the other side, it was very much a stock reply, it wasn't detailed, and I felt that they were just saving their own face, making it look like they were trying to help but they weren't really. It makes me feel like they've seen that there are problem, they knew there are problems when I was there, but and even when I've written all about it on the review, they've not done anything about it and they don't seem to really care about it (R8, female, 29, single, university staff).*

The above excerpt shows that the participant, a reviewer, initially felt positive about receiving a response. However, since the response is not detailed and seems like a standardised message, instead of forming a positive perception about the hotel, she thinks that the hotel is ignoring the problem. Furthermore, instead of calming the complainer's emotions, when it contains a standard message, a response can create the opposite effect, as shown in the following:

> *A few times I became angrier because of the way they respond. They didn't consider my problem and didn't offer anything to solve that. They should've taken action about it, but they didn't (R14, male, 28, single, PhD student).*

The participant admitted that he becomes angrier after reading the response. By responding to the review, the hotel's management has given a signal that they have read the review. Therefore, the participant expected the management to provide some solution to his problem. However, instead of addressing the problem and showing the steps that they have taken or will take in order to fix the problem, the management provided a standard message. The participant then assumed that the hotel did not do anything to address his problem. Furthermore, the participant felt ignored and became angry towards the hotel.

Based on the above examples, it is advised not to provide consumers with a standardised message. Especially in response to a negative review, it can have a detrimental impact on the perceived level of care. Firms should avoid this practice for that reason. Consumers perceive personalised offers as more relevant to their needs and better aligned with their preferences, which in turn enhances their purchase intentions (Xia and Bechwati, 2008). Providing a personalised message in the response would also enhance potential consumers' booking intentions.

4.3.3.6 Effect of no response

Finally, it is essential to know about the impact of no response. From observations of online review websites, it is evident that some hospitality firms do not respond to reviews. Interviews revealed various reasons such as limited resources, and some decided to stop responding or only respond occasionally. Some participants admitted that they had to stop responding because they were very busy with other projects and did not want to allocate the job of responding to reviews to someone else. One participant claimed to be in part-time employment, in which she needed to allocate her limited work time for a lot of different tasks within her job description. Therefore, sometimes there was a big delay to her responses, which could result in a negative perception because readers may read the review before it has been responded to and assume the hotel was not going to respond when in fact they would respond later.

> *If they get a negative response, I look at it and I think they haven't responded, I'm thinking it's not a good hotel. I might not want to go to that one, yeah because if the hotel has replied I would probably say 'yeah they responded to it so they know that there's an issue', if the customer has complained, if the customer has put that complaint in, so if the hotel's not addressing it then they're just not really interested in customers (PG52, female, 35, married with children, stay at home mom).*

The above participant, a potential guest, claimed that she would put the hotel out of her consideration because of the absence of a response. The participant sees the response as an acknowledgement of a problem and an indicator of the hotel's level of care. Therefore, the absence of a response from hospitality firms, especially to a negative review, is seen as a negative behaviour which could lead to negative emotions such as anger and frustration (McColl-Kennedy and Sparks, 2003). Another example is shown below:

> *I would prefer to get a response even if it's just an apology, so when it's no apology or no response then my impression of that hotel or restaurant goes down even further, I think (R43, male, 63, married with children, university staff).*

Another participant, a reviewer, also stated a similar opinion as that shown above. This participant also forms a negative perception when he sees no response to his review. The same effect also occurs when he receives a response with no apology. According to this participant, the apology is the most crucial element of the response to negative reviews. A different perception about no response was also identified through the study, as shown below:

> *If they still meet the same criteria that I had before, the absence of the reply will not change my perception of them (R6, female, 31, married with a child, PhD student).*

Interestingly, some participants had a completely different opinion about this. The above excerpt shows that some participants do not consider the response at all. Therefore, having seen no response does not change their perception of the hotel. The above excerpt is from a reviewer claiming that even if a hotel does not give her a response, she would still consider returning to the property, as long as it maintains the same service quality. The above participant has a positive experience with the hotel and has no hesitation in returning.

Based on the findings discussed above, hospitality firms should make some effort to respond to reviews. Even though some participants from potential guest and reviewer groups do not form a negative perception when they see no response to a review, others do, especially when it's a negative one. Creating and maintaining a positive online reputation is the primary motive of hotels' interventions. Furthermore, consumers are more inclined to write a positive review for a hotel which has been responding to reviews (Proserpio and Zervas, 2017). Therefore, hospitality firms are advised to respond to their customer reviews, and extra effort should be given to responding to the negative ones.

4.3.4 Reviewers and potential guests' awareness of the intervention's message

Hotel group participants' belief about the ability of their response to create and maintain an online reputation could be attributed to their perception that readers always read the response. However, the interviews with potential guests and reviewers suggests that they do not always check the response. Several potential guests interviewed for this study claimed that they do not check to see if there is a response to the review:

> *I never read what the hotel said. In some of ths reviews, I notice on some pages, the hotel, every time, has made a comment. I don't bother reading them (PG45, female, 65, married with children, retiree).*

The above excerpt shows that the participant, a potential guest, is aware of the hotel's response to the reviews. However, she decided to skip that part and focus on reading the reviews. The main reason for this behaviour is that she believes that hospitality firms always put a defence in their responses to maintain their positive image. Some participants believe that hospitality firms' responses would not add any value to their decision-making process. Hence, these participants do not bother reading the responses, and thus are not aware of the message.

Some participants from the reviewers group made similar claims. Even though some of them wrote a negative review or made a complaint in their review, they did not expect to receive a response from the hotel. Thus, these reviewers did not intend to check for a response. Some other reviewers left the process to the website's procedure and stated their confidence that they would receive some notification when the hotel responded to them. Since these participants did not receive a notification, they didn't go back to the website and check, as explained in the following excerpts:

> *That's why I don't check. I don't really expect a reply or anything, I just write it (R18, female, 31, single, PhD student).*

> *If the hotel gives me a response, I will get an email telling me that I get a response to my comment. Otherwise, I will not check it (R20, male, 30, married, PhD student).*

Some other participants stated that they did not check the response because they did not intend to revisit the accommodation. The participant below highlighted the fact that if she has no intention of returning, checking the response is of no benefit to her.

> *It's very hard to keep on checking what others are writing especially if I'm not travelling again to the same place (R1, female, 29, single, PhD student).*

In these examples, the messages from hospitality firms do not change participants' perceptions because they are not aware of the messages. One of the reasons for this is that some participants presumed that hotels would always send a defensive message which would not add any value to their decision-making process. In other words, any response from the hotel would not be beneficial to them. Another reason is that the participants do not expect a response and do not intend to visit again. Since the hospitality firms' response is of no benefit to them, they disregard it. This finding is an essential addition to the literature because it is beneficial for academics and marketers trying to construct a response strategy or considering responding to online reviews as their form of service recovery.

4.4   Conclusion

This chapter discussed the three actors' perspectives on consumer reviews and firms' interventions. It was divided into two parts, the first was dedicated to exploring online consumer reviews while the second part explored firms' interventions. The first part started by defining the benefit of consumer reviews for reviewers and potential guests, followed by identifying benefits for hospitality firms. This continued with a discussion about the negative side of reviews, strategies used by reviewers and potential guests to utilise the reviews, and

hospitality firms' evaluation of reviews. The second part of the chapter explored the various aspects of firms' interventions; the importance of interventions, firms' response practices; the effects of intervention; and reviewers and potential guests' awareness of firms' messages. Figure 4-1 encapsulates the main findings of this chapter.
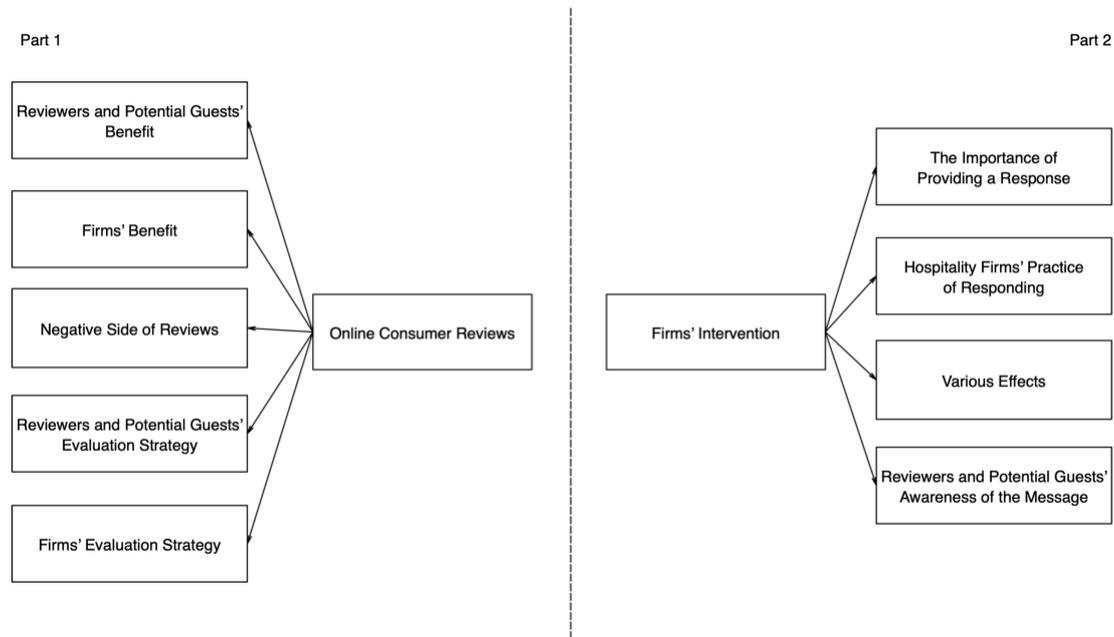
Figure 4-1 Visual summary of key findings from Chapter 4

The chapter identified that the immediate effect of reviews on reviewers and potential guests is a strengthening of their bargaining power through obtaining a greater depth of information that would not normally be available (Mayzlin, Dover and Chevalier, 2014), as admitted by almost all participants. This situation provides them with more options for their decision-making processes (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Davis and Agrawal, 2018). Therefore, their bargaining power increased because they do not have to depend on the service marketer and can make better decisions. This increased bargaining power caused by the fact that the majority of consumers are reading reviews before the purchase, has forced hospitality firms to closely monitor reviews, which ultimately contributes to better service quality (Torres, Adler and Behnke, 2014; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018).

Furthermore, consumer reviews have also provided firms with useful information for their improvement, performance measurement, strategy formulation and inducing consumers' interest. The chapter continued with the identification of the negative side of reviews, which consist of consumers' misbehaviour as well as their avoidance to make a direct complaint. Some examples of misbehaviour include corrupt complaints practiced by some reviewers (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018) to gain upgrades, discounts or other compensation.

The other negative sides of reviews are the subjective nature of reviews which sometimes also seen as untrustworthy. Further, the number of reviews with different valence, has caused some participants to feel overwhelm because of their cognitive overload.

To gain maximum benefit from reviews as well as to avoid being overwhelm, some participants from potential guest and reviewer groups claimed that they have used some strategies. These strategies were utilising past knowledge, utilising self and functional congruity as well as investigating the reviewer's characteristics. Even though some tourism research has utilised self-identity theory (e.g., Chon, 1992; Sirgy and Su, 2000; Litvin and Goh, 2002; Beerli, Meneses and Gil, 2007; Boksberger *et al.*, 2011; Gration, Raciti and Arcodia, 2011; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011; Pratt and Sparks, 2014; Gazley and Watling, 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2015), this thesis is the first to apply the theory in this way. Finally, this section of the chapter concluded with a discussion of the strategies utilised by hospitality firms to evaluate reviews. Even though some participants from the business group claimed that they do not respond to reviews, all of them monitor reviews. Some hotels conducted the monitoring manually, while others, the bigger chain hotels, used software from a reputation management company such as Review Pro, Trust You or Venue Verdict.

In the second part of the chapter, the importance of firms' interventions was first discussed, followed by common practices undertaken by hotels to respond to reviews. Common practice in responding includes some investigation followed by crafting a personalised message as well as assigning an appropriate source in a timely manner. Firms are advised to be very careful in choosing their tone of voice while avoiding sounding arrogant. Regarding the source, the safest choice for a hotel would be to assign a person who is able to make improvements and has some responsibility and involvement in the daily operations of the hotel.

Further, establishing para-social interaction where the source of the message tries to have an actual interaction with the audience on the review website was a good example. Hospitality firms should also consider potential guests when they craft a response and insert promotional messages along with the response to some issues. This is because the main audience for the intervention is not the one who wrote the review, but the potential guests who are looking for information for their decision-making process. An interesting finding regarding the impacts of intervention is that hospitality firms should be discouraged from offering a standard response because it is more detrimental than providing no response, especially when responding to a negative review. Therefore, since consumers are more inclined to write a positive review of a hotel which has been responding to reviews

(Proserpio and Zervas, 2017), hospitality firms are advised to always give a personalised message and avoid standardised messages.

When discussing the effect of intervention, it was revealed that there were three additional reasons for writing reviews mentioned by the participants in the study. One of the reasons, peer pressure, can be seen as an additional motivation that might encourage consumers to write a review and discourage them from making a direct complaint. While the other two reasons - the degree of service failure and consumer perception that a review website is the best medium for complaining - could be seen as the factors contributing to consumers' tendency to write reviews. These findings contribute to the literature by adding new motivations for complaining online and giving additional knowledge that there are a number of factors contributing to consumers' preference for making online complaints. Finally, the chapter also identified that there are various behaviours associated with responses. Some reviewers and potential guests were aware of responses and read them because they wanted to have more complete information before making decisions. However, there were also others who were not aware of the messages because they decided not to pay attention to firms' responses for various reasons.

Chapter 5.   Findings and Analysis: Paradoxes of Hospitality Firms' Interventions

5.1   Overview of the chapter

Having analysed the data, it can be concluded that online consumer reviews and companies' interventions have different effects, which can be both positive and negative at the same time. Without a doubt, besides offering some benefits, reviews and firms' responses also have some disadvantages or negative aspects. There were some contradictions, or paradoxes, observed in the data. The first paradox is that negative reviews damage consumers' perceptions but also contain useful information (section 5.2). Most participants from consumer groups admitted that they formed a negative perception when they read negative reviews. However, there were some participants who read the review carefully, and interestingly, they did not form a negative perception. This group of participants were mindful about the negative reviews.

Additionally, it was observed that consumers gain benefits from the reviews, which led to the improvement of their bargaining power. However, the availability of online consumer reviews has also discouraged them from lodging a direct complaint with hotels during their stay. Almost all hotels interviewed for this study confirmed that behaviour. They stated that there are an increasing number of consumers who leave feedback through their online reviews, rather than saying something to the hotel. Even when the reception staff asked for their feedback during check out, as part of the hotel's service quality initiative, some customers would still say nothing. These hotels regretted the fact that many customers prefer to write their comments and complain on review websites instead of giving direct feedback to the hotel. Section 5.3 discusses this contradiction.

The third contradiction observed was between the benefits that hotels gain from reviews and the detrimental effect of negative reviews. By monitoring online consumer reviews, marketers can obtain real-time data about their customers. This was previously hard to achieve but is now easily accessible. Marketers gain market insights and develop new strategies based on online reviews. Marketers can also monitor their performance and maintain it by comparing the reviews with their processes. Moreover, the biggest advantage for marketers is that online reviews can generate consumer interest. Hotels do not have to undertake additional promotion to generate this, other than providing good service quality. However, almost all firms participating in this study also reported the detrimental effects of negative reviews. They felt that they were held liable for some comments from a minority of the guests. Because of this, some hospitality firms even claimed they would prefer a world without online reviews. This discussion is presented in section 5.4.

Similar to the findings regarding online consumer reviews, contradictions were also observed among the findings about hospitality firms' interventions. The first of these was observed by analysing participants' accounts of delivering an intervention by way of responding to a review. The intervention was made by the hotel in an effort to build a positive online reputation. However, some participants (i.e., reviewers and potential guests) admitted that they often had the impression that firms were only providing a response to defend their hotel, or "excuse-making" (Lee and Cranage, 2014, p. 349). This discussion is presented in section 5.5.

The second paradox regarding hospitality firms' interventions relates to the fact that consumers gave more consideration to the review than to the response. While many participants decided to read the response, when asked whether or not they would consider it in their decision-making process, most of them answered that they would put more weight on the review itself. Other participants claimed that they decided not to read the response because they were sure that it would only contain hospitality firms' defence. They did not see any value coming from reading the response. A contradiction occurred because some participants also formed a negative perception when they saw no response from hotels. They expected firms to provide a response to a review, in particular a negative one. The discussion about this last paradox is presented in section 5.6. This chapter then ends with the conclusion (section 5.7).

5.2   First paradox: negative reviews damage consumers' perceptions but contain useful information for consumers and hospitality firms

The first contradiction concerns how negative reviews can still have a positive impact for consumers and hospitality firms. A number of participants from potential guest and reviewer groups agreed that they form negative perceptions about a hotel whenever they read a negative review about it. Some participants would automatically disregard the hotel when they spotted a negative review. These participants confirmed the opinion of some scholars that negative reviews would create a negative perception about the service (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Phillips *et al.*, 2016; Chan *et al.*, 2017), and that negative reviews have more power in damaging consumers' perception about service quality than positive reviews in creating positive one (Browning, So and Sparks, 2013), as mentioned in the excerpts below:

> *I tend to first look at the negatives and if there is some horrendous review then that will start to…alarm bells will start ringing in my mind if I see that (PG47, male, 49, university staff).*

If there is a bad review there, I'm not going to book it (R36, female, 27, PhD student).

I trust the negative ones, I assume that those are true (PG21, male, 31, PhD student).

One possible explanation for this situation is that these participants were afraid that the same negative experience would happen to them if they ignored the review. Moreover, similar to research that suggests "destination revisitation (repurchase) is less possible because purchase is usually infrequent" (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005, p. 827), most participants admitted that they prefer visiting different cities when they travel. In this situation, most of them wanted to optimise their stay in a particular hotel, hence most of them would only consider the best alternatives. This was especially so because these participants were unable to cross check the information in the reviews. They had no other option than to believe the reviews, as stated by several participants below:

If it's a bad review, then I'll pay more attention, to see what they are saying because that might happen to me (R32, female, 30, single, PhD student).

I have no reason to doubt the review so far. Because for example the review said that the front office staff was friendly but then when I went there it was probably different people who serve me, so there's no way of telling anyway (R5, female, 42, married with children, doctor).

A number of participants believed that consumer reviews, including the negative ones, were honest consumer accounts about the accommodation. They believed that they were written by real customers. Regarding the negative ones, they did not see why a consumer would want to fake a negative review in the same way that a hotel would write a fake positive review about themselves. For this group of participants, a negative review would make them change their mind about the hotel, as stated below:

I believe the majority of the reviews are true (R38, female, 33, single, PhD student).

I don't think the customer will not just put a negative comment out of nowhere. But the hotel can provide can put fake positive reviews (R20, male, 30, married with children, PhD student).

I'm sure that I have disregarded places because I've looked at reviews and thought actually that doesn't sound as good as it made itself look (R19, female, 31, single, PhD student).

The same belief about the detrimental effects of negative reviews was also mentioned by a number of hospitality firms participating in this study. Furthermore, most of them believed that the majority of reviewers were only compelled to write a negative review, but not motivated to write a positive one, which is known as reporting bias (Dellarocas and Wood, 2008). One participant from the hotel group recounted their own experience to illustrate this:

> *I go out and have a nice dinner, or a nice day somewhere, or even go into a shop and I'm treated well. I take that away with me and that makes me feel quite nice and I just get on with my life. I don't feel compelled to go and write a review about it. But I suppose, if you go somewhere and you feel you're treated badly or you feel you're ripped off, or you feel you had a bad experience, you want to get your own back and punish that person or that business or that organisation. And that's where feedback is a great way of doing that, isn't it? You can hurt them (H10, the owner of a 4-star country house hotel).*

The above experience of putting negative feedback on an online review platform was a manifestation of indirect revenge (Grégoire, Laufer and Tripp, 2010). From the last sentence, it seems that the motivation was primarily to punish the company. According to Grégoire & Fisher (2008), by spreading negative word of mouth, even a loyal customer can become the company's worst enemy after a service failure. Based on this experience, the owner formed a perception that most reviewers would only write negative reviews, and that these reviews would severely damage the service provider's image. Many other hotel participants formed the same perception about negative reviews. They strongly believed that negative reviews could damage their reputation.

However, there was another group of participants who thought otherwise. Instead of instinctively forming a negative perception after reading a negative review, they decided to evaluate more reviews in order to form a complete picture of a company (Lee and Cranage, 2014). In other words, negative reviews are also deemed helpful by consumers (Filieri, Raguseo and Vitari, 2018). According to Xia & Bechwati (2008), for consumers who have already formed their preferences, one negative review is not sufficient to influence them to change their preferences. Furthermore, the presence of a positive review among a number of negative reviews can have a favourable impact on consumers' decisions, while the presence of a negative review in the middle of numerous positive reviews may not have the same effect (Book *et al.*, 2018).

This is probably why some participants decided to keep reading the negative reviews, while using a number of strategies to evaluate them (more information about this is available in section 4.2.4):

> *I will try to be critical of them. I know not everyone could have a 100% satisfactory experience, so unless the complaint is huge and have been complained by a lot of people, then I wouldn't consider the thing too much. If a negative review has come up much time, then I need to have a look at this negative side (PG10, male, 28, single, PhD student).*

From the above excerpt we can see that this participant has accepted the fact that hospitality firms are not perfect, therefore some dissatisfaction is to be expected. He decided to continue reading the negative reviews because he wanted the information to help form his expectations (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Filieri and McLeay, 2014). He did not mind staying at a hotel which has some negative reviews. One explanation for this is that he was actively evaluating the degree of complaint and whether he would be able to cope with that during his stay. In this situation, rather than using the negative cue to evaluate the message, he was relying more on the message itself. He gave more cognitive effort to deciding whether the negative review was worth his attention.

Further examples demonstrate how some participants decided to read negative reviews in order to gain information, as set out below:

> *I do read negative reviews, but depends on the percentage of the negative reviews and total amount of the reviews, if there's only like let's say ten out of a hundred saying this place is rubbish, probably I would still be fine, if it's like twenty or thirty then I would probably just skip this place, so it depends on the amount of negative reviews I'd say (PG35, female, 24, single, PhD student).*

> *The complaints tell you sometimes more than the glory around all those five star, you know, reviews about how great the place is. I look at a couple – just the good ones – some two or three stars because it's interesting to see the lowest, kind of the worst reviews even (R48, female, 40s, university staff).*

The first instance above shows that in order to determine whether or not the negative reviews were trustworthy, this participant was guided by the number of negative reviews about one particular hotel. The second excerpt indicates that even though the participant seeks to gain some information from positive reviews, reading the negative reviews is still considered necessary. This particular participant conforms with the literature suggesting that

consumers give more weight to a negative review (Park and Lee, 2009; Book *et al.*, 2018) because it is "perceived to be more diagnostic, useful and persuasive (Lee and Cranage, 2014, p. 347)". However, it should also be noted that a negative review can have detrimental effects, so a suitable response strategy should be adopted to preserve a company's reputation (ibid, 350). In contrast, another study found that in some cases, negative publicity can increase sales by increasing product awareness (Berger, Sorensen and Rasmussen, 2010). These authors argued that negative publicity helped unpopular products get on the radar of customers; "review valence fades overtime and negative reviews increase purchase likelihood by making people more aware of the product (ibid, 824)".

One interpretation of why there are differences in how consumers perceive reviews, especially negative reviews, is that they have different levels of involvement and personal relevance, as explained by the new general model of tourism decision making from McCabe, Li and Chen (2016). According to this model, decision processing may *either* use system 1 (heuristic: emotional, automatic, intuitive, less effort) *or* system 2 (systematic: rational, complex reasoning, more effort) based on the tourist's level of involvement. Tourists with low involvement use system 1, whereas those with high involvement use system 2. In system 1, tourists largely depend on recognition and social heuristic, and may even finalise their decision without a search for external information or conducting an evaluation of the alternatives. On the contrary, in a high involvement situation, tourists use system 2 and perform a complex information search. However, when cognitive overload occurs, tourists might switch to system 1 and might engage in trade-off or lexicographic heuristic. Tourists may make a decision based on the most important attribute (trade-off heuristic), or they may rank information they have received in the previous step within different categories.

All three conditions in the model can be identified in this study. There were a number of participants who decided to immediately form a negative perception whenever they read a negative review. These participants could be grouped into low level involvement and using system 1; they did not want to process the message more thoroughly. The second group would be the group of participants using system 2, those who have a high level of involvement and decided to keep reading the negative reviews in order to learn something important from them. Finally, the last group of participants were the ones who switched from system 2 to system 1, probably because they have a moderate level of involvement. They decided to read the negative reviews but used several cues to help them evaluate the message:

> *I don't think you can see a lot of very good information on the positive reviews, so I will focus on the negative reviews to see what kind of negativity I will encounter if I*

visited there. So I think I will just focus on the negative side. Well, of course, I will also read the positive ones and take them into my consideration, but I will focus on the negative sides of the reviews (PG10, male, 28, single, PhD student).

The above excerpt portrays a situation in which the participant, a potential guest, decided to focus on reading the negative reviews because he felt that he could get more information from them. This participant can be put into the second group because he decided to keep reading negative reviews in order to gain more information about the hotel. Even though he also read positive reviews, he confessed to putting more weight on the negative reviews, which corresponds to the view of Book *et al.* (2018). This was likely due the fact that he was neutral prior to reading the reviews and "turned to negative reviews to better understand the service" (Racherla and Friske, 2012, p. 557). One interpretation of this behaviour is that this participant had high involvement (in choosing the accommodation) and was able to process the message with scrutiny.

The last group is those with moderate involvement. Participants from this group used a number of cues in order to decide whether or not the message was worth reading further. The valence of reviews did not bother them as much. As long as they felt satisfied with the cue(s), they then read the review in its entirety. Some participants used a number of cues such as their past knowledge (about things being mentioned in the review or about the review itself), searched for some similarity with the reviewer, skimmed the review to find a certain topic, and even learned about the reviewer's characteristics before they read the review (further explanation is offered in section 4.2.4). After confirming with the cues, these participants then read the reviews thoroughly, which helps explain why these participants claimed that they could still gain some valuable information from the negative reviews. The fact that hospitality firms could also gain some benefit from negative reviews (section 4.2.2) has confirmed the first paradox of online consumer reviews.

In conclusion, the first contradiction occurs as a result of the different levels of involvement and ability to process the message possessed by consumers, which could be explained by the new general model of tourism decision making from McCabe, Li and Chen (2016). Even though many participants instinctively formed a negative perception after reading a negative review, there were many others who decided not to stop at the negative cue but read on to find more information about the accommodation. The fact that positive or neutral perceptions may form towards a negative review and some participants can still learn something from them, highlight the first contradiction.

5.3 Second paradox: reviews benefit consumers but also cause consumers to become less active in making direct complaints

Section 4.2.1 discussed how consumers gained some benefit from the presence of online reviews, which allow consumers to gain information more easily. As a consequence, they can make an informed decision and form clearer expectations about the service. Hence, their probability of achieving satisfaction is increased. Consumers also gain the ability to influence other consumers by posting about their experiences on review websites. As a matter of fact, informing and influencing other consumers was the most common motivation identified by the reviewers interviewed for this study. It outweighed other motivations, such as showing gratitude to hospitality firms, venting anger, reminding the hotel to pay more attention to some processes (which could also be categorised as helping the hospitality firms) and revenge, as stated by these participants:

> *I am aware it's useful. I know that part of the selection process for me was someone else giving that information to allow me to look. So, if I contributed the same, someone else might have a similar capability to make that choice (R27, male, 38, married with children, doctor).*

> *I thought it was a really nice hotel and I wanted to encourage more people to stay there, so I did write a positive review about it, and I think I said it was like a hidden gem because not many people knew about it (R43, male, 63, married, university staff).*

From these excerpts we can see that most reviewers admitted that they wrote a review because they themselves had benefitted from reading reviews beforehand. They thought that they could repay the reviewer who had positively contributed to their decision-making process by writing another review or spreading positive e-WOM. Therefore, they were aware that their review could influence other consumers in their decision-making process. Hence the following comment:

> *I just wanted for other people to know that what was advertised there was what we experienced, and the host, her husband was a fountain of knowledge really, he knew so much about the local history and directed us to different museums to go and see things, and I felt it was only fair to actually support them (R42, female, 47, married with children, university staff).*

The above excerpt illustrates a reviewer's motivation in sharing the information, and also her belief about a review's ability to influence other consumers. When she wrote a positive

review, she believed that it could help the hotel. However, the opposite scenario also applies:

> *I make sure I'm writing my review so that people can have a look at it because I think that's my best weapon against… let's say, against them or against their service. Like, a customer saying what happened to him or her and then people reading it, they might change their decision because of that review, if it's something that's important for them (R32, female, 30, single, PhD student).*

This participant positioned her review as information counter to the company's communication. Based on the excerpt, she was convinced that her review had the power to influence other consumers to consider changing their decision. These instances reflect the findings of research which suggests that consumers may prefer information from user-generated content such as online consumer reviews (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013) because it is perceived as more trustworthy than advertising (Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay, 2015).

The topic of reviewers' motivations has attracted the attention of many scholars. Research about consumers' motivations to write reviews can be traced back to research investigating word-of-mouth (WOM) motivations. Consumers' participation in an online travel community is motivated mainly by social and hedonic benefits as well as functional and psychological benefits (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004; Parra-López *et al.*, 2011). Specifically regarding motivation to write feedback on an online consumer review platform, seven motives are proposed; enjoyment or hedonic motivation, exertion of collective power over companies, venting negative feelings, concerns for other consumers, helping the company, expressing positive feelings, and self-enhancement (Yoo and Gretzel, 2008). The excerpts presented above correlate with some of these motives such as venting negative feelings and helping the company, as well as expressing positive feelings, whilst the act of repaying the previous reviewer could be grouped into the motive of concern for other consumers.

Because of the above-mentioned reasons, companies have devoted more attention to their service quality in order to prevent negative consumer reviews (Gregoire, Salle and Tripp, 2015). These companies perform real-time guest satisfaction management by asking about their customers' experience during check out and by providing printed questionnaires in the room (Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). These companies actively monitor and improve their service, resulting in a much better service offering which is another benefit for the consumer.

However, as has been stated before, the utilisation of online media by a company can induce its customers to perform online complaint (Gregoire, Salle and Tripp, 2015; Grégoire

et al., 2018; Obeidat *et al.*, 2018). Online complaining is a mass-communication act directed to a large public with the primary motive of hurting the company, and can hence be seen as an act of indirect revenge (Grégoire, Laufer and Tripp, 2010). That likely explains why even though all the business participants interviewed for the study recognised that they benefit in some ways from online reviews (section 4.2.2), a number of them still have negative feelings towards the reviews.

These participants believed that reviews were the reason why more customers decided to avoid engaging in direct communication. There was an instance recounted by one participant about a consumer who decided to write a review on social media, rather than go to or call reception with a request. Another participant also gave an example of avoidance of direct complaint in which the customer did not say anything negative during check out, but posted a negative review afterwards, as follows:

> *I think what's worse was if you had a chat with someone in the morning and they will say 'yes, it's fine, I enjoyed it' and then you find them on TripAdvisor afterwards and you think 'oh, why didn't you tell us?'. So it is difficult. I think in some ways there is more investigation, there is more opportunity for people to complain, they will still go to TripAdvisor and writing it as they would have to do an email or a letter in the past, or a phone call (H3, marketing manager, 4-star independent boutique hotel).*

As suggested by the above excerpt, all business participant interviewed prefer direct complaints because they provide the opportunity for amendments to the service to be carried out (Kim *et al.*, 2003; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018), thereby reducing the likelihood of consumer revenge (Grégoire, Laufer and Tripp, 2010) while also improving the customer's satisfaction. This goal is hard to achieve when the complaining customer has already left the premises. This condition and the presence of "fake reviews" (Keates, 2007; Larson and Denton, 2014), as well as some misbehaviour attempts by customers, were the reasons why some hospitality firms declared consumer reviews to be a "double-edged sword" (Dixit, Jyoti Badgaiyan and Khare, 2019). Most of them still have some doubts about reviews, as demonstrated by the following example:

> *If it has the right impact and it makes people do a better job and be more accountable and look to provide better service, then it can't be a bad thing. Hopefully (H10, the owner of a 4-star country house hotel).*

According to this participant, online consumer reviews have brought numerous benefits to the industry. They have compelled hotel managements to work towards a better quality of

service, which has ultimately benefitted consumers. However, in some instances customers decided not to engage in direct communication, preferring instead to make indirect complaints. As a result, firms became concerned about online reviews (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998) because they lost the opportunity to provide better service (Gregoire, Salle and Tripp, 2015).

Some researchers suggest that the reason why some consumers make indirect complaints is because they have limited interest in reparation, revenge being their primary motivation (Gregoire, Salle and Tripp, 2015). Findings from the thesis suggested that peer pressure, as well as the degree of service failure and consumer perception that a review website is the best medium for complaining, contribute to the behaviour of making indirect complaints. Furthermore, Aquino et al. (2001, 2006) state that consumers have a greater tendency to act out of revenge when they have more power than the company (Grégoire, Laufer and Tripp, 2010). As has been discussed in section 4.2.3.1, consumers gain more bargaining power over the company because they have easy access to information sources which enable them to influence other consumers' decision-making processes, thereby confirming this proposition.

In conclusion, this thesis suggests that the second contradiction is caused by widespread access to the internet which has made it easier for consumers to access information to inform their decision-making processes, as well as for disseminating information. However, this privilege has led more and more consumers to avoid engaging in direct communication with businesses to discuss any issues or problems during their stay. This condition, of course, has put firms in jeopardy, as it could damage their reputation. The contradiction of consumer reviews as experienced by hospitality firms is discussed in the following section.

5.4   Third paradox: reviews benefit hospitality firms, but negative reviews can be detrimental

Section 4.2.2 discussed how hospitality firms gained some benefit from the presence of online consumer reviews. Most participants from the hotel group reported that since they can access online consumer reviews easily, they can use the information available to gain market insights and to measure their own performance, as well as to compare it with their competitors' performance. As a result, they were also able to develop a number of strategies based on the reviews and generate a competitive advantage. In addition, online reviews were shown to be consumers' preferred source of information to aid decision-making (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013), and can also cultivate consumers' interest which can shape their purchase intentions (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013).

The above conditions are applicable for both negative and positive reviews. Businesses and consumers can acquire valuable information from reviews. Negative reviews could be seen as an improvement opportunity by businesses. As discussed earlier in section 5.2, there were several participants who preferred to read negative reviews because they thought these contained more valuable information that positive ones. Therefore, all reviews were perceived to be beneficial, no matter their valence.

However, many business participants reported concerns about online consumer reviews because they believe that a negative review can be harmful to their business:

> *That's really important, it helps us to better our product in identifying issued that we might not be aware of. My opinion about reviews, it works both ways, if it's a good review, that's great, if it's not such a good review then it's not that great. And obviously, we prefer to hear from the guest first hand if there's an issue whilst they're still in the hotel so we can still fix it. But if we missed the opportunity, we need to do something afterwards. With social media, it's a double-edged sword, really. It can benefit your business if it's done correctly or it could completely destroy you. We can't ignore TripAdvisor, we can't ignore the social media. Years ago we used to say don't worry but the way social media has evolved, you need those tools, you have to be close to those tools and you have to do your best to be on their side and work with it. It's like the enemy if you can't win the enemy just join them and that's exactly what it is. They can be very beneficial to your business (H6, general manager, 4-star boutique hotel).*

This participant admitted that a negative review has given her some benefit. She was able to identify some problems in her hotel and make some improvements which eventually translated into a competitive advantage. However, she also stated that negative reviews can harm the business, especially when not handled properly. According to some scholars, negative reviews can damage a company's image, reputation and sales (Lee and Cranage, 2014). Hence, she prefers to receive a direct complaint because it allows her to make improvements to the service right away. Therefore, she concluded that online consumer reviews are a 'double-edged sword'.

Some participants from the hotel group openly stated their dislike of online consumer reviews. They prefer not having to deal with reviews and admitted being happier with conditions before online reviews existed. However, they also acknowledged that online consumer reviews are going to be around for a long time, and they have to confront them in order to survive.

I'm in the day of age when most people look for information on the internet. Facebook is also a growing platform; we try to keep the reviews on there. But at the same time, even a negative review can be turned around into a positive statement as well. Do I like reviews? No (laugh). I prefer to be back in 1980 where there is no such thing as the internet and make running a hotel a lot easier. But they're not gonna go away (H9, general manager, 3-star independent hotel).

In conclusion, the third contradiction was caused by the benefits that hospitality firms receive from the existence of reviews and the negative effect of negative reviews, which unfortunately have more power in damaging consumers' perceptions about service quality than positive ones in creating positive perceptions (Browning, So and Sparks, 2013). This contradiction is the last one caused by reviews; the following two sections discuss the contradictions caused by firms' interventions.

5.5   Fourth paradox: a company can build a positive online reputation by responding to reviews, however, reviews are also often seen as a company's defence

Several findings of the thesis correspond to the literature about the role of managerial response in online reputation management (Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Liu and Law, 2018; Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019). According to the literature, response management could affect online reputation, improving customer satisfaction and increasing the likelihood of revisiting, leading to customer loyalty. However, some findings pointed in a different direction. Some participants claimed that they would always see a hotel's response as a defence. Some of these participants do not even read responses because of this assumption. Hence the occurrence of the first contradiction. The following is an excerpt about how a response can create a positive perception:

I feel like they care. It's good for a hotel to reply to a negative comment. The least they can do is apologise. I think it's very good when the hotel management replies to a very bad comment and saying they're sorry about the problem and will refund that night stay. You feel that they value their customer and they want to make it better for them. While if they ignore the review, even the bad ones, it just shows that they don't care, and they are in just to keep the business rather than to actually keep customers. It actually makes me feel better when they reply to my review. I was relieved that they acknowledge my feeling and the message has gone to them and it's actually indicating an issue that needs to be fixed. They might really look into the matter and it's still there publicly (R17, female, 30, married with children, PhD student).

The above excerpt shows that after reading the response, the participant forms a positive perception of the hotel. The participant, a reviewer, stated that by receiving the response, she felt valued, respected and cared for. Giving a response also suggests that the hotel will improve service quality. Another participant gave a slightly different perspective on management's responses. From his point of view, giving a response means that a hotel invests considerable effort in retaining their customers, which was perceived as a positive thing. According to this participant, who is a potential guest, in order to monitor reviews and give appropriate responses, a hotel should invest in additional workforce. This is perceived as a positive initiative conducted by a good hotel; thus he would consider staying at the hotel:

> I might think that the hotel wants to give a good image of itself and so, I might consider it because a hotel that invests… because this is like an investment. You have to hire another person who are wading through… or two or three persons, who have to spend all the time looking at the feedback from the other people, not maybe only on TripAdvisor but also, it might be a Facebook if they have a page on there. So, I think it's one hotel that wants to improve itself and I might consider it as a hotel (PG30, male, 29, single, PhD student).

Furthermore, a response can change consumers' opinions about something, as shown in this statement:

> If someone said, you know, it was incredibly noisy or I don't know, the food was really rubbish or something and then someone's taken a lot of time to reply to that and apologised and explained why that might be, then yes, that would change my mind, if I thought that it was reasonable ((R23, female, 30, single, PhD student).

According to the above excerpt, participants' perceptions of a hotel can change when they read a reasonable response from the hotel. This situation corresponds with the literature saying that management's response could reduce the effect of unfavourable reviews on hotel performance and enhance the effect of favourable ones (Xie, Zhang and Zhang, 2014; Xie, Kwok and Wang, 2017).This gives hospitality firms some hope in relation to the detrimental effects of negative reviews. More discussion about how a negative review can damage consumers' perceptions, but nevertheless contains useful information, is presented in section 5.2.

On the other hand, some other participants felt that hotel managers would always give a positive response to every review. They doubted hotels' intentions to improve their service. These participants felt that it is only lip service, something that the management needs to

state in their response in order to generate positive perceptions amongst readers. Therefore, even though some of these participants decided to read the response, their initial assumption about the response created a barrier to positive perception creation. Since they doubted hospitality firms' integrity in responding to the review, a positive perception is unlikely to result from the response. The following excerpt from a potential guest demonstrates this:

> *To be honest, not really. Because I feel that the hotel will be defensive. They will always say sorry, apologise and promise to rectify the problem. Doesn't matter. If they can take some action, it will send me the message that the people in the hotel are monitoring the reviews and they have a standard and they are trying to improve it, but it will not change my decision in choosing the hotel. So, if I want to book a hotel and I read the reviews about the hotel. My decision to book the hotel will not change because of the reply from the hotel alone (PG7, male, 30s, married with children, PhD student).*

The above excerpt is an example of an apathetic participant who thinks that a response is always a defence. Even when the hotels express their regret and state their intention to make improvements, these participants' perceptions of the hotel do not change. Seeing a response makes these participants aware that a hotel is monitoring reviews and has a standard operating procedure to deal with them but does not contribute to their decision-making process when booking a hotel.

In conclusion, even though it is widely known that a hotel's response contributes to its online reputation (Proserpio and Zervas, 2017; Liu and Law, 2018; Perez-Aranda, Vallespín and Molinillo, 2019), hospitality firms should also be aware that some participants have a preconception that a response is a defence (Tax, Brown and Chandrashekaran, 1998; Mattila, 2006; Lee and Cranage, 2014). Every word written in the response is interpreted as defensive, even when it is accurate. For this reason, some participants decided not to read any responses. Even though the number of participants who have this preconception was outnumbered by those who formed a positive perception after reading a response, firms should be aware of this fact and put more effort into preventive strategies than recovery strategies. Therefore, rather than providing a carefully crafted persuasive message in the response, it is better for a hotel's reputation to provide excellent service quality in the first place. A response risks creating a negative perception (e.g., seen as a defence) which could damage the hotel's reputation.

5.6   Fifth paradox: even though consumers give more consideration to reviews, they often have a negative perception when they see no response

Participants who chose to read hotels' responses were found to put more weight on the reviews that were written by consumers. Some participants claimed that even though the intervention enabled them to see both sides of the story, they favoured the reviews over the firms' interventions. This could be attributed to the fact that consumers prefer information from other consumers (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013) because it is perceived as more trustworthy than a company's communication initiative (Filieri, 2015).

Meanwhile, some other participants didn't even require a response. They preferred to skip the responses and concentrate on reading the reviews. Therefore, it is safe to say that generally, participants were more compelled to read reviews than the response from hotel managers. However, these participants also admitted that they would form a negative perception if they did not see a response, especially to a negative review. This has created another contradiction regarding hospitality firms' interventions; the response is ignored, but when it is not given it creates a negative perception of the hotel. The following excerpt from a potential guest illustrates this matter perfectly:

> *When I check those negative reviews, my own purpose is to find out what are the potential problems of this property, and I pay less attention to the comments [hotel's response] personally, but then if, for example if you see like twenty complaints and no-one bothers to reply, then I would be like, you would think about it like 'okay, maybe they don't care', so you know, when I notice that it's going to have an impact, but if I ignore that, because like I said I just want to see what are the problems, if I ignore that probably it's fine, but if I notice okay gosh, it's thirty complaints and no-one replied (PG35, female, 24, single, PhD student).*

The above excerpt is evidence that some participants tend to ignore hotels' responses when they read online consumer reviews. They concentrate on reading reviews to learn more about the accommodation in order to make a better decision. Therefore, hospitality firms' responses do not have any effect on them. It is worth noting that even though this participant decided not to read the responses, she is aware of them. She notices whether or not a response is provided, and when a response is absent, especially to multiple negative reviews, she forms a negative perception of the hotel. The hotel is perceived as not caring about its customers. Therefore, even though some participants do not read responses, this study still recommends that hospitality firms respond to reviews:

I don't make a decision if I see a reply or not, but sometimes when there's a bad review and I see a reply, it improves my impression about the hotel or made me realise that this hotel cares about their customer (R1, female, 29, single, PhD student).

A valuable lesson can be learned from the above excerpt. Even though the participant claimed that she only reads responses occasionally and does not base her decisions on them, reading a response can lead her to form a positive perception of the hotel. The participant sees the hotel as caring; thus, it improves her perception. Along with the fact that failing to provide a response is seen as bad custom, hotels are advised to respond to reviews, especially negative ones, because a lack of response to negative reviews may damage a hotel's reputation (Lee and Cranage, 2014). Therefore, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, managers are advised to make a response which acknowledges the dissatisfying event, provides an account (explanation) for its occurrence, and references actions taken (Sparks and Bradley, 2014, p. 1).

In summary, this contradiction arose because some participants admitted that they primarily consider reviews but often form a negative perception when they do not see a response, especially to a negative review. When some participants notice the absence of a response, especially to multiple negative reviews, they form a negative perception about the hotel. The hotel is perceived as not caring about its customers. Therefore, hospitality firms are faced with a difficult situation: there seems to be no correct way to handle this. Consumers do not pay attention to the response when they respond to reviews, but if firms do not respond, it is seen as a bad practice. However, since the latter situation produces more negative effects, hospitality firms are advised to respond to reviews, especially if they are negative. These insights contribute to the literature and should be understood by firms so that they are equipped to address the situation and allocate their resources wisely.

5.7   Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how online consumer reviews and firms' interventions form contradictions which influence all three groups of actors in the relationship (i.e., hospitality firms, reviewers, and potential consumers). The first contradiction, or paradox, concerns how negative reviews can still have a positive impact upon consumers and hospitality firms (section 5.2). As the analysis has suggested, this contradiction occurs because participants from consumers groups (reviewers and potential guests) have different levels of involvement and personal relevance. Those with low level involvement naturally form a negative perception whenever they read negative reviews. This is in line with the literature saying that when consumers read negative reviews, they form negative perception regarding the service

(e.g., Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Phillips *et al.*, 2016; Chan *et al.*, 2017), which is detrimental to the business. However, the findings of this study revealed that not every consumer does that. Some participants with a high level of involvement reported that they keep reading negative reviews to find relevant information in order to form a complete picture of a company (Lee and Cranage, 2014). Other participants with a moderate level of involvement used some cues to help them decide whether or not the message was worth reading further, without paying attention to the message valence. For the last two group of participants, they "turned to negative reviews to better understand the service" (Racherla and Friske, 2012, p. 557) because they are "perceived to be more diagnostic, useful and persuasive (Lee and Cranage, 2014, p. 347)". Therefore, negative reviews are also beneficial for consumers and firms.

The second paradox is the result of a contradiction between how reviews create some benefits for consumers but also cause some consumers avoid direct complaint (section 5.3). As has been mentioned in the previous paragraph, reviews can provide consumers with relevant information which they could not otherwise obtain. Therefore, consumers have the ability to make better decisions, without being dependent on information from the marketer. Other than that, reviews have also provided consumers with the power to share their opinions with a wider audience. Consumers' opinions, often called user-generated content, are deemed more trustworthy than a company's own advertising (Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay, 2015), leading consumers to put more trust in them (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013). Because of this, consumers gain additional benefits as companies work their hardest to deliver the best service quality in order to prevent negative reviews (Gregoire, Salle and Tripp, 2015). Unfortunately, the ease of access to the internet which has made online reviews accessible and created benefits for consumers has also made consumers more hesitant to make direct complaints. Findings from the study suggested that peer pressure, as well as the degree of service failure and consumer perception that online review is the best medium for complaining, contribute to the behaviour of making indirect complaints. This behaviour can damage a firm's reputation because they lose the opportunity to rectify problems and improve the service (Kim *et al.*, 2003; Gössling, Hall and Andersson, 2018). This also means that consumers lose their chance of benefiting from improved service.

The last paradox of consumer reviews relates to the fact that reviews can offer several benefits to hospitality firms, but on the other side (especially negative reviews), can also have detrimental effects (section 5.4). Most participants from the hotel group agreed that reviews can be used to leverage their business. Positive reviews can act as free advertisement which is more credible than any communication effort performed by the

company. As discussed earlier even negative reviews, can result in benefits to the company in that they can raise consumer awareness towards the company and its product. Many consumers, especially ones with a high level of involvement, read negative reviews to gain more useful information for their decision-making process. Furthermore, the majority of hotel participants admitted that a negative review has been used as a source of information to identify problems in the hotel and make necessary improvements which eventually translated into a competitive advantage. However, they also stated that negative reviews can harm the business, especially when not handled properly, because they can damage a company's image, reputation and sales (Lee and Cranage, 2014). That is probably why most participants from the hotel group prefer to receive a direct complaint because it allows them to make improvements to the service instantly.

To provide a clear understanding about how the paradoxes of online reviews are formed, please refer to Figure 5-1 below:
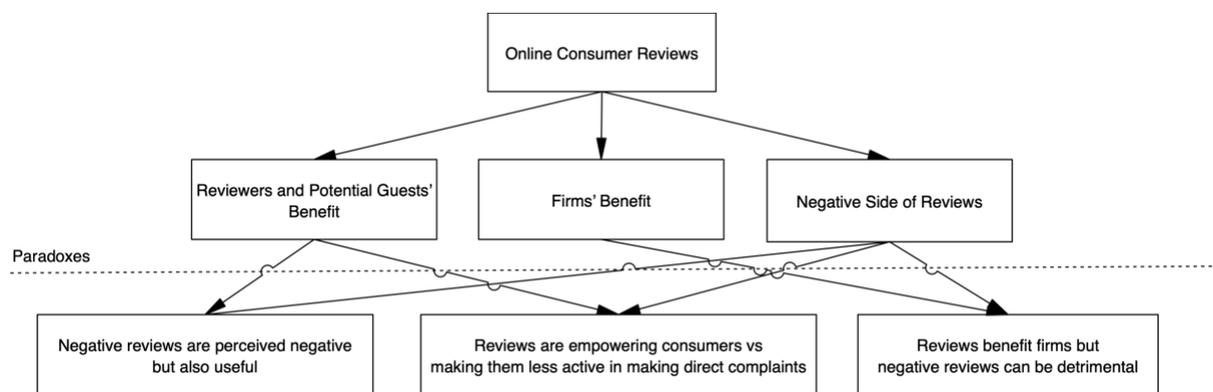
Figure 5-1 Formation of paradoxes of online reviews

Meanwhile, the first paradox regarding hospitality firms' intervention is formed because their response to reviews can help build online reputation but is often seen as a defence (section 5.5). Responding to reviews can help a service provider to maintain its online reputation by reducing the effect of unfavourable reviews and enhancing the effect of favourable ones on hotel performance (Xie, Zhang and Zhang, 2014; Xie, Kwok and Wang, 2017). The management can give some assurance to their customer that they are actively listening to reviews and are allocating resources to monitoring reviews. Some participants from the reviewer group admitted that they have changed their perception because of responses. Some of them felt respected and valued by the hotel when they read the response. In the meantime, some participants from the potential group have also reported that their perceptions change after reading responses to reviews, especially ones that are reasonable. However, service providers should be aware that some other consumer participants felt the

opposite. They do not even read responses because they already have an assumption that every response is a defence. They do not believe that hotel management has a genuine intent to improve the service as stated in the response and think of the response as lip service. Therefore, firms should put more effort into preventive strategies than recovery strategies.

The last paradox is formed because readers put more weight on the reviews, but they also often form a negative perception when they realise there has been no response, especially to negative reviews (section 5.6). As mentioned in the last paragraph, some participants from the consumer group perceived responses as lip service and did not bother to read them. Some others admitted that even when they read responses, they put more consideration into the reviews themselves. Again, this could be attributed to the fact that consumers prefer information from other consumers (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013) because it is perceived as more trustworthy than a company's communication initiative (Filieri, 2015). However, even though many participants admitted that they ignore hotels' responses, they are aware of them. They realise that hotels have been giving responses to some of the reviews. Furthermore, these participants form negative perceptions when a response is absent, especially to multiple negative reviews. The hotel is perceived as not caring and hotel management is advised to make a response which acknowledges the dissatisfying event, provides an account (explanation) for its occurrence, and references actions taken (Sparks and Bradley, 2014, p. 1).

Figure 5-2 portrays the main findings of this chapter which illustrates how the paradoxes caused by firms' intervention are formed.
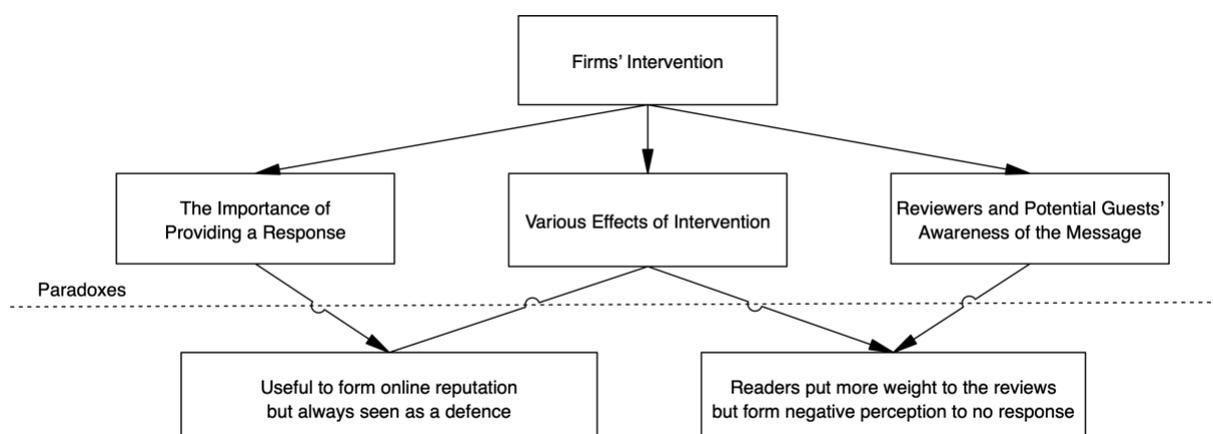
Figure 5-2 Formation of paradoxes of firms' intervention

Chapter 6.   Conclusion

6.1   Overview of the chapter

This final chapter presents the conclusion of the thesis. It starts by revisiting the purpose and aims of the study in order to present a summary of the research findings (section 6.2), then continues with a discussion of the contribution of the thesis (section 6.3). The chapter then considers the limitations of the study and further avenues for research (section 6.4). Finally, the thesis ends with the researcher's concluding remarks and personal reflections (section 6.5).

6.2   Purpose and aims of the study and thesis summary

The literature reveals that most existing studies focus only on the potential guest's point of view of the value of online reviews (e.g., van Noort and Willemsen, 2011; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013; Cheng and Loi, 2014; Xie, Zhang and Zhang, 2014; Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015; Sparks, So and Bradley, 2016). There is a lack of research that accounts for the reviewer's point of view (e.g., Tripp and Grégoire, 2011; Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015), and even less that has attempted to study the company's point of view (e.g., Park and Allen, 2013). This represents an important omission since they are key actors, contributing to the body of material on online review platforms. Moreover, Wei et al. (2013) suggested that there is no study that has integrated the perspectives of these three actors, to further explain how they interact with each other after they have been exposed to online consumer reviews and hospitality firms' subsequent interventions.

Therefore, this thesis investigated all three perspectives at the same time (i.e., hospitality firms', potential guests' and reviewers' points of view). Because the study tried to incorporate all three perspectives from each actor's point of view, a qualitative methodology was used to allow for a "holistic overall inquiry" (Noy, 2008, p. 334). This was also a direct response to the call from some scholars regarding the need to incorporate all three actors in the same study (Wei, Miao and Huang, 2013; Sparks, So and Bradley, 2016). This qualitative study also enriches the literature which is dominated by quantitative studies.

The thesis sought to address the above-mentioned call from scholars, the specific aim of the study being to explore the interplay between online consumer reviews and hospitality firms' interventions from the reviewers', potential guests' and hospitality firms' perspectives. In order to meet the research aims, the thesis adopted the following research questions:

a) How do reviewers, potential guests and hospitality firms perceive online consumer reviews and firms' responses to those reviews?

b) What are the strategies that reviewers, potential guests and hospitality firms employ in interpreting online consumer reviews?

c) How do hospitality firms respond to consumer reviews?

d) What are the implications of the interaction between consumer reviews and firms' interventions for tourism and service marketing?

The previous two chapters have discussed the answers to the research questions which can be summarised as follows:

6.2.1 The three actors' perception about consumer reviews and firms' responses

Reviewers and potential guest (consumers) participants perceive online consumer reviews as beneficial in that they can provide them with more bargaining power over hospitality firms. Potential guests become more informed and reviewers have more influence over other consumers. Reviews also benefit consumers as hotels are providing better service quality to prevent negative reviews. On the other hand, most consumer participants also perceive some reviews as subjective and untrustworthy. Additionally, the number of online reviews on the internet sometimes caused them to experience cognitive overload resulting in more confusion. Furthermore, ease of access to the internet has resulted in some participants from the reviewer group choosing online reviews as their outlet to file a complaint and avoid making direct complaints.

Regarding firms' responses to the reviews, most participants from potential guest and reviewer groups perceive them as a constructive initiative needed to be done in the hotel's reputation management. Many participants formed a positive perception after reading the response. However, many other participants felt the opposite and see the response as a defence. They do not necessarily change their perception after reading the response. Interestingly, even though some participants did not read the response, the same participants also formed a negative perception when they see no response, especially to negative reviews. Lastly, hotels should avoid providing a standard response, particularly to a negative review, as it is perceived as ignoring the problem.

Most business participants perceive online reviews as a double-edged sword. They believed that the information from reviews is real and can be followed up with corrective actions. Therefore, information from reviews can be used as an input for a hotel's strategy and can also be used to measure performance. Furthermore, reviews and hotels' responses can also function as a marketing communication tool to attract potential guests. However, most hotel participants also believed that online consumer reviews can also induce consumer

misbehaviour while negative reviews might damage the hotel's reputation and hinder potential guests' action, making the choice to ignore them risky.

6.2.2   The three actors' strategies in interpreting the reviews

Since hospitality product is experiential, intangible, cannot be tested before purchase, and tends to be more costly (Gursoy, 2018; Tan *et al.*, 2018), most reviewers and potential guests interviewed decided to read numerous reviews in order to make a holistic judgement. When reading the reviews, they have to evaluate those with different valence regarding various topics which sometimes confuses them. In order to effectively evaluate these reviews, some participants admitted that they utilise a number of strategies such as employing their past knowledge, utilising self and functional congruity, and investigating the characteristics of the reviewer.

On the other hand, even though not all hotel participants give a response to reviews, almost all of them monitor reviews regularly, either by utilising software (e.g., ReviewPro, TrustYou or Venue Verdict), or manually monitoring reviews websites (e.g., TripAdvisor, Booking.com, etc.). Those participants who subscribe to a company providing the monitoring software receive regular email updates and detailed analytics reports (e.g., rooms, restaurant, spa, etc.) while some others collate reviews manually. The report from each activity is used by the manager to pinpoint areas for improvement. The management then hold a regular meeting to discuss the review report and update the hotel's strategy accordingly.

6.2.3   Hospitality firms' response to reviews

After performing some investigation, most participants craft a personalised message from an appropriate source in a timely manner. A personalised message is of utmost importance because a standard message is perceived as not engaging and is seen as a signal that the hotel management is choosing to ignore the problem even though they have been made aware of it. It creates an uncaring image and forms distrust among participants. One participant also established para-social interaction with the reviewer where she tried to have an actual interaction with the reviewer. Furthermore, some participants craft a response which not only provides some answers to reviewers, but also contains information to invite potential guests to visit the establishment. Regarding the source of the message, some participants have assigned the general manager, owner or another member of staff. Based on the consumer groups' perception, hotel managers are advised to assign a person who is able to make improvements and has some responsibility and involvement in the daily operations of the hotel (e.g., general manager). Finally, the timing for responding to reviews is handled differently by the various hotel participants. Some respond to the reviews every

day while others respond every month or whenever they have time. However, after considering consumer group participants' perceptions regarding the timing of response, a prompt response is advised. A prompt response is better for the hotel's ranking and contributes to a positive image of its level of care, especially among those who give some consideration to this.

6.2.4 The implications of the interaction between consumer reviews and firms' interventions for tourism and service marketing

Five contradictions are formed as a result of consumer reviews and firms' intervention. The first three contradictions are formed because participants from the three groups experienced both positive and negative effects after reading the reviews. The last two paradoxes are formed as the result of consumers' level of awareness and their perception of the response. The first contradiction concerns how negative reviews can still have a positive impact upon consumers and hospitality firms (section 5.2). One possible explanation of this condition is because according to McCabe, Li and Chen (2016), consumers have different levels of involvement and personal relevance. Therefore, consumer group participants with a high level of involvement keep reading the negative reviews and learn something useful from them. Because of this, negative reviews also benefit hotels.

The second paradox is the result of a contradiction between how reviews create some benefits for consumers but also cause some consumers to avoid making direct complaints (section 5.3). Online reviews provide consumers with an easy means of obtaining information. Participants from the potential group gain a reliable source of information about something which otherwise difficult to obtain. In fact, more potential guests are using online reviews as their primary source of information. Aware of this condition, firms are focusing more attention on their service quality in order to prevent negative consumer reviews (Gregoire, Salle and Tripp, 2015), resulting in a better service offering, which is another benefit for consumers. Unfortunately, easy access to reviews has made some participants from the reviewer group hesitant to make a direct complaint. This behaviour was deemed risky by most hotel participants because it can create negative perceptions among consumers. These participants also feel that they are treated unfairly when reviewers don't give them a chance to rectify the situation first.

The third paradox relates to the fact that reviews can offer several benefits to hospitality firms, but on the other hand (especially negative reviews), can also have detrimental effects (section 5.4). Consumer reviews are beneficial for businesses because consumers use them as a credible source of information which can raise consumer awareness. Almost all hotel

participants admitted that they too can use reviews as an information source for service quality improvement. However, they added that negative reviews can also harm the business because they can damage a company's image, reputation and sales (Lee and Cranage, 2014).

The fourth contradiction is formed because hospitality firms' response to reviews can help build online reputation but is often seen as a defence (section 5.5). Responding to reviews can give consumers assurance that hotels care for them and are working actively to give the best service quality. Some participants from the consumer groups reported that their perceptions have changed because of responses. However, some other participants admitted that they have never read the responses because every response is seen as a defence. This emphasises the importance of preventive strategies so then companies do not need to answer negative reviews.

Finally, the last paradox is formed because readers put more weight on reviews, but they also often form a negative perception when they realise there has been no response, especially to negative reviews (section 5.6). As has been mentioned in the previous paragraph, some consumer participants perceived responses as a defence mechanism. Even though they are aware of the responses, they decided to ignore them. However, these participants also formed a negative perception when they realised that hotels do not respond to reviews, especially to the negative ones. Therefore, since the negative effect of not responding exceeds the negative effect of responding, hotels are advised to make a response which acknowledges the dissatisfying event, provides an account (explanation) for its occurrence, and references actions taken (Sparks and Bradley, 2014, p. 1).

Table 6-1 Summary of key findings

No.	Research Question	Findings
1	How do reviewers, potential guests and hospitality firms perceive online consumer reviews and firms' responses to those reviews?	Even though reviews are perceived as subjective and untrustworthy, some participants from the reviewers and potential guest groups (i.e., consumer groups) find them beneficial because they can provide them with more bargaining power over hospitality firms. However, some reviews are perceived as subjective and untrustworthy, which can create a cognitive overload and leads to confusion. Regarding the responses, most participants perceive it as positive, and some others did not even read them. Most hotels that participated in the study perceive consumer reviews as a double-edged sword. Reviews can give them many benefits but also induce consumer misbehaviour, while negative reviews might damage a hotel's reputation and hinder potential guests. On the other hand, responding have given hotels the opportunity to manage their reputation and can also be used as a useful marketing communication medium.
2	What are the strategies that reviewers, potential guest and hospitality firms employ in interpreting online consumer reviews?	Most participants from the consumer groups are utilising their past knowledge, utilising self and functional congruity and investigating the characteristics of the reviewer when they interpret reviews. Most business participants monitor online reviews regularly and use information from the reviews as an input in strategy formulation. Some of them use software from a reputation management company while some others assign some employees to monitor the reviews manually. Every information from this monitoring process is taken to their meetings.
3	How do hospitality firms respond to consumer reviews?	Most hotel participants perform some investigation followed by crafting a personalised message from an appropriate source in a timely manner. Establishing para-social interaction with the reviewer is a positive initiative which should be done by all hotels.
4	What are the implications of the interaction between consumer reviews and firms' interventions for tourism and service marketing?	Five paradoxes are formed as a result of the interaction between consumer reviews and hotels' interventions.

6.3   Research contribution

This thesis contributes to the current literature on the impact of both online consumer reviews and hospitality firms' interventions. Contrary to the majority of existing studies that only investigate online reviews or hospitality firms' responses from an individual point of view, this thesis provides a comprehensive view of the impact of both online reviews and hospitality firms' responses, from every actors' point of view, as suggested by Wei et al. (2013) and Sparks et al. (2016). By exploring the interplay between online reviews and hospitality firms' responses as experienced by consumers and hospitality firms at the same time, several contributions have been made. First and foremost, this thesis shows that

several contradictions occur when the three actors experience the various effects of reviews and responses at the same time. The effects are contradictory because they could be simultaneously beneficial and detrimental to the participants. Several explanations offer new insights into this phenomenon.

Second, the study offers several strategies that can be employed by consumers and hospitality firms in order to overcome the contradictions and maximise the potential benefits of reviews. By doing so, the thesis provides some support for the role of self-congruity and functional congruity as the basis of strategies for consumers in evaluating the content of online reviews. The thesis contributes to the consumer behaviour literature by explaining the potential use of self-concept theory, especially self-congruity and functional congruity, used by consumers when they are evaluating confusing reviews. Participants from consumer groups refer to the reviewers' profiles and the message itself and decide to only read reviews written by someone who is similar with them.

Third, the thesis highlights additional motives that drive consumers to write reviews rather than making a direct complaint to the service provider at the point of the experience. Fourth, the thesis shows that some participants assign neutral feelings when they read a response, or when they are aware of the absence of a response. The thesis also argued that some consumers choose to ignore responses and give more consideration to the reviews themselves. This suggests that the responses provided by service firms are not effective tools of communication. However, some participants assigned a negative perception when they saw that a hospitality firm had not responded.

Fifth, while using hospitality firms' perspectives to learn about consumer reviews, the thesis also explains how consumer reviews and hotels' responses can minimise Gap 1 and Gap 5 in the service quality model. Finally, the thesis offers some suggestions in the context of marketing communication theory regarding the source of the message and the timing of the response. The thesis also provides some support for the inclusion of para-social interaction in the message.

6.3.1 Theoretical contribution

The first contribution of the thesis comes from the integration of the three actors' perspectives in investigating both online consumer reviews and hospitality firms' interventions, at the same time. As discussed earlier, having the three perspectives at the same time has made it possible to look at the situation more thoroughly, resulting in an awareness of the contradictions that consumers and hospitality firms experienced, which have often been overlooked by previous research. By doing so, this thesis contributes to the

theory on reviews as an information source and search processes by highlighting the paradoxes caused by the positive and negative impacts of online reviews and hospitality firms' responses simultaneously.

The literature has made apparent the positive and negative effects of online reviews and firms' responses. However, most studies look at the effects separately (e.g., Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Levy, Duan and Boo, 2012; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Phillips *et al.*, 2016). The thesis has highlighted that these effects are contradictory, and the data suggests that both hotels and consumers are experiencing these paradoxes. Furthermore, it not only highlights the contradictions, but also provides some explanations regarding the causes of these contradictions. For example, the first paradox occurs because not only do negative reviews damage a company's reputation, but they can also have positive impacts on them such as providing hotel with information about areas that need to be rectified and raising consumers' awareness of the service. The thesis shows that some consumers have also gained benefits from negative reviews. A possible explanation was given after analysing the data using the new general model of tourism decision making from McCabe, Li and Chen (2016). Consumers have different motivations and personal relevance when they read the reviews. Therefore, not only did they not assign a negative perception after reading negative reviews, but some participants with a high level of involvement performed a complex information search and read the negative reviews thoroughly, receiving valuable information from them. In addition to the fact that hospitality firms also receive some benefit from negative reviews in that they are able to gather valuable information about the market, the contradiction is apparent.

Secondly, the thesis contributes to theory about the ways reviews and responses are understood and evaluated by highlighting the links to self-concept theory for the first time. As explained in the literature review (especially section 2.2.6), self-concept theory, particularly the concepts of self-congruity and functional congruity, has been used in various instances of consumer behaviour research, including in the tourism context. However, most tourism research has used the self-congruity concept to investigate destinations as brands (Chon, 1992; Sirgy and Su, 2000; Litvin and Goh, 2002; Beerli, Meneses and Gil, 2007; Boksberger *et al.*, 2011; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011; Ahn, Ekinci and Li, 2013; Pratt and Sparks, 2014), or to compare general travel motivation and festival motivation (Gration, Raciti and Arcodia, 2011). Further, both self-congruity and functional congruity have been used to show the degree of similarity between the evaluation of bloggers' functional attributes and readers' needs (Wang *et al.*, 2015). This study is the first to apply self-congruity and functional congruity concepts in a consumer review setting to further explain potential guests' and

reviewers' behaviour in evaluating online consumer reviews. Additionally, this thesis shows that the self-congruity concept can be used by hospitality firms when creating a customised response.

Thirdly, the thesis contributes to theories of service quality gaps by revising the service quality model from Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985). The revised model incorporates online consumer reviews and hospitality firms' interventions and acknowledges the differences between reviewers and potential guests/tourists. Additionally, reviews are seen as the result of the gap that reviewers experience between their expectations and the actual service they receive. Furthermore, an additional dimension is included to accommodate the practice of hospitality firms responding to reviews, which can change the reviewer's perception of the firm's service and will be used as additional information when they are reforming their expectations. This study proposes that both consumer reviews and hospitality firms' responses can minimise Gap 1 and Gap 5 in the model. Gap 1 is the gap between the company's perceptions about consumers' expectations of the service and their actual expectations, while Gap 5 is the gap between consumers' expectations about the service and the actual service they receive. Firstly, and quite straightforwardly, the reviews contribute to e-WOM that potential guests/tourists acquire when they are forming their expectations about a service. Because the expectations are formed after reading some reviews which portray the real situation or service delivery, Gap 5 can be minimised (and denoted as Gap 5^1). Secondly, the utilisation of consumer reviews by the company can minimise the gap between the company's perceptions about consumers' expectations of the service and their actual expectations (Gap 1). This gap exists because the company cannot interpret consumers' expectations correctly. By monitoring reviews, hotels develop a better understanding of consumers' expectations because the reviews are written by customers who have stayed in the accommodation. Therefore, firms' perceptions of consumers' expectations and consumers' actual expectations can become more similar (denoted as Gap 1^1). Thirdly, hospitality firms' responses are expected to change reviewers' perceptions about the service, which then contributes to their service expectation, and thus can also minimise Gap 5.
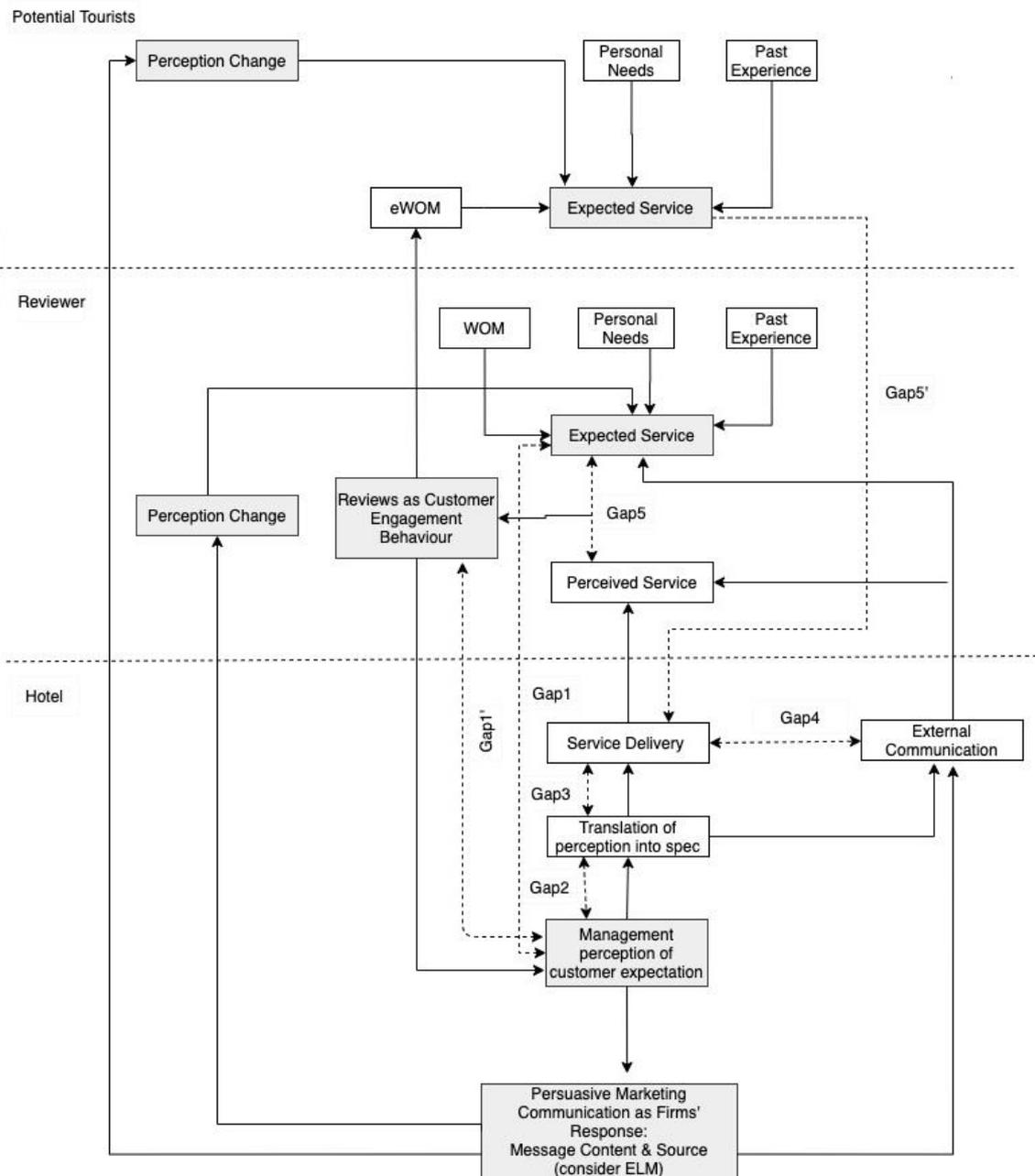
Figure 6-1 Service quality model incorporating the presence of consumer reviews and firms' responses

It should also be noted that a comparison of the thesis' finding with those of Mauri & Minazzi (2013), shows that there are some similarities regarding the behaviour of some participants who did not consider hospitality firms' responses as a key factor, but instead had a negative impact on customers' purchasing intentions. However, the thesis also found that firms' responses also created positive and neutral impacts. Some participants also deliberately chose not to read the response, and therefore did not experience any impact. Based on the analysis, even though some participants did not think of the response as a key factor, they

formed a negative perception towards the absence of a response. These various impacts, which in some ways are contradictory, represent the fourth contribution of this thesis. Therefore, this thesis contributes to the theory on the impact of hospitality firms' responses on consumers. These impacts have to be considered simultaneously when companies design some intervention or develop a strategy.

Fifth, the thesis contributes to theories of motivation in online engagement activity in word-of-mouth by identifying the addition of one motivation, and several factors contributing to consumers' preference for making online complaints. These are distinct motives that have not been identified in the literature. As discussed in chapter 4, there are a number of motives for writing a positive review: altruism (i.e., to help others make better decisions), product involvement, self-enhancement, and helping the company. The motivations for engaging in negative WOM are altruism (i.e., to prevent others from having the same bad experience), anxiety reduction, retribution and advice seeking (Sundaram, Mitra and Webster, 1998). Some findings from the thesis have confirmed these, especially altruism (e.g., to influence others) or concern for other consumers, as mentioned by Yoo & Gretzel (2008). However, some participants mentioned a number of reasons which have not previously been identified in the literature discussed in chapter 2. One of the reasons, peer pressure, can be seen as an additional motivation that might encourage consumers to write reviews. The other two reasons - the degree of service failure, and consumers' perception that review websites are the best medium for complaining - can also be seen as factors contributing to consumers' tendency to write reviews.

Finally, the thesis contributes to theory about the ways responses to reviews should be created by emphasising the benefits of including para-social interaction in the response. According to the literature, an emphatic and paraphrased response (Min, Lim and Magnini, 2015) is needed in the firm's intervention. Further, the literature offers "the triple A typology" as guidance for writing a customised response (Sparks and Bradley, 2014). Para-social interaction, which was suggested by Horton and Wohl (Levy, 1979), has been used to explain the influence of social media influencers (Daniel, Crawford Jackson and Westerman, 2018). However, based on the analysis, it can be concluded that even though the source of response is not a social media influencer, hotel management can try to create para-social interaction with the reviewer. One of the participants gave a good example of such behaviour, using the same style as the reviewer while addressing every complaint or question.

6.3.2 Practical contributions

In addition to offering theoretical contributions, this thesis also provides some practical suggestions for firms communicating and maintaining relationships through online platforms, as follows:

Regarding negative reviews, as discussed in section 5.2, there were a number of participants from the consumer groups (i.e., reviewers and potential guests) who admitted to still reading reviews because they found them to be useful. Since most participants confessed that they formed negative perceptions after reading negative reviews, hospitality firms are advised to provide responses in order to instil positive messages. That way, even though hospitality firms cannot prevent the formation of negative perceptions, consumers are also exposed to the positive information provided by hospitality firms. Hopefully, especially for consumers who have high motivation and personal relevance, they will still consider the hotel as one of the options for their stay. Furthermore, hospitality firms are encouraged to always respond to reviews because even though some participants chose to ignore responses, others perceived not responding as bad practice.

Similarly to the findings of research by Mauri & Minazzi (2013), the study found that some participants from both potential guests and reviewers groups did not consider hospitality firms' responses as a key factor. Instead, in some cases responses had a negative impact on their purchasing intentions. Moreover, the thesis also found that hotels' responses created positive and neutral impacts, while some reviewer and potential guest participants did not experience any impacts because they did not read the responses. However, as stated in the previous paragraph, even though these participants did not consider the response to be a key factor, they formed a negative perception towards the absence of a response. In agreement with Levy et al., (2012) it is therefore suggested that hotel management should always respond to reviews.

Moving on to the content of the response, since hotels' main objective in responding is to create and maintain their hotel's reputation, the response should be persuasive. This can be achieved as long as firms utilise a strategy that addresses the content of the message and the source, as well as the timing. The findings suggest that firms should avoid providing a standard response, especially for negative reviews. Furthermore, responses should be targeted towards the general reader or potential customers. However, they should contain a personalised detailed argument and specific actions to address the issue. Furthermore, in addition to answering the questions and concerns of the reviewer, they should also be used as a promotional medium to communicate more information about the hotel. For example,

hospitality firms can insert information about an afternoon tea promotion in their response to a review related to the restaurant's facilities. This information, which is accidentally captured by the reader, will hopefully be stored in their long-term memory, ready to be recalled when needed.

The thesis also provides an interpretation of consumers' preferences regarding the source of a message. The analysis suggests that participants have different opinions regarding who they consider to be an appropriate source for a response to a review. Therefore, the safest option is to assign someone who has some authority to make improvements and who is involved in the daily operations of the hotel. Finally, it is suggested that hospitality firms provide a response as soon as possible as this not only contributes to a better rating but also correlates with their perceived level of care.

There were some instances where guests made requests via social networking sites. From the analysis, it seems that one of the main reasons for such behaviour is consumers' reluctance to communicate with human personnel. Therefore, hotels could set up some communication channel that guests can access from their own mobile phone. Hotels should create an application for their customers which features their booking menu as well as a chat function through which guests can easily communicate with the hotel in real time. For example, the World of Hyatt application already features a booking menu and a contact menu which connects the customer with the hotel's Twitter account and Facebook messenger. According to the application, replies are typically sent within an hour. Hotels should utilise this kind of application to its full potential and provide one more communication channel so that the customer can easily connect with the hotel's staff. This means that when a problem occurs, it can be communicated directly to the property in real time.

Using this kind of application, guests can communicate with the hotel without having to speak directly to the hotel staff. Hotels can encourage guests to download the application by sending a link in the booking confirmation. Information about the benefits of using the application should be made available to potential guests, and guests should be informed about this beforehand. Staffs should remind guests about this during check-in. Potential discounts or bonuses can also be used as an endorsement to trigger customers' adoption of such applications. If the hotel has an online check-in facility, all relevant information about the application should be given during online check-in, including a reminder to use the application for all services including online complaints. Hopefully, online complaints can be prevented or minimised through this initiative. Prevention is the best strategy as some consumers might see every response as a defence (Tax, Brown and Chandrashekaran, 1998; Mattila, 2006; Lee and Cranage, 2014). Using this kind of application, firms can detect

potential complaints faster. This enables them to perform service recovery while the guests are still in residence. This kind of application can also be used to inform guests about any improvements made. This kind of initiative has the potential to improve guest satisfaction rates and to reduce online complaints.

The findings of this thesis can also be used by hospitality firms to educate and encourage customers to be more active in communicating and complaining directly. Even though some participants perceived writing a review to be more effective and less time consuming, by writing a review they may lose their opportunity to have the issue resolved whilst they are still staying at the hotel. Therefore, hotels should educate their guests about this whenever possible, for example during check in. Front office staff could encourage guests to come to reception or use the kind of application that was suggested earlier, whenever they encounter a problem. They can also stress the fact that by doing this, any rectification will be done as per their request and they will have more chance of having the best experience. This information can also be presented during the online check-in process.

6.4   Limitations of the study and further research areas

As with all research, this thesis has several limitations. The first limitation, as the result of the qualitative methodology chosen, is the limited transferability of the thesis because of the small number of reviewers, potential guests and hospitality firms interviewed, all within the same geographic location. There was also some difficulty in recruiting reviewers as participants. Initially, the researcher intended to utilise the function of 'ask the reviewer on TripAdvisor', in order to find participants. However, out of more than one hundred emails sent via TripAdvisor, only one replied. TripAdvisor was chosen initially because it is the biggest online review website and the only platform known to provide this facility. Therefore, another path had to be pursued. An online advertisement to recruit participants was put out but received no responses. Therefore, the researcher had to go with convenience and snowball sampling in order to recruit participants.

Getting in touch with the correct person was the main obstacle to recruiting hospitality firms. The first stage of recruiting hospitality firms involved sending more than thirty emails to all the hotels listed on TripAdvisor which were located in Nottingham. Only a few replied and were happy to participate. The next method was to call them. However, finding out who to talk to was not easy because not all hotel websites are user friendly. Sometimes it took a lot of time to find the relevant contact number or email address for the information desk. After calling the information desk and finding out who the appropriate person was, another obstacle was to get in touch with them, due to their busy schedule. However, when they had

been successfully contacted and briefed about the purpose of the research, almost all were happy to participate. Because of these obstacles and the limited time that the researcher had, a limited number of participants were interviewed.

The previous section explained how online consumer reviews and responses should be accommodated in the service quality model, and suggested the revised model shown in Figure 6-1. Even though this model seems to fit based on the author's understanding of the situation, no further research has been conducted to test the model. This was due to the nature of the methodology chosen, and because it was beyond the scope of the research. However, future research could employ quantitative methodology and set out to test the model. This would enable the revised and comprehensive model to become more established.

As the analysis progressed, the researcher learned that culture has an impact on how consumers perceive service quality (Furrer, Liu and Sudharshan, 2000) and on their complaining behaviour (Wan, 2013), as well as on their tendency to make an e-complaint (Au, Law and Buhalis, 2010). Since the participants were limited in number as it was, the study could not be limited to participants from only one cultural group. However, this could be an interesting avenue for further research. Future research could select participants from a similar cultural group to see if they experience the same contradictions as those revealed in this thesis.

Further research also needs to be conducted to investigate one of the findings from the thesis regarding consumers' misbehaviour contributing to hospitality firms' negative perception of online review platforms. As Cohen, Prayag and Moital (2014) concluded in their study, 'consumer misbehaviour' is one of the under-researched areas within consumer behaviour in tourism marketing. One of the findings from the thesis is that consumers have gained substantial power over hospitality firms because of their ability to influence other consumers through their reviews. Some consumers have used the availability and ease of access to online review websites to 'blackmail' marketers to get better service or some gratification. Further study into this topic is needed to develop a better understanding of consumer misbehaviour, and to draw some guidelines on how best to handle this type of consumer.

Finally, observation of online consumer review websites revealed that there were numerous examples of no response being given to a review. Participants reported a number of different perceptions regarding this situation. The first was a negative perception, which corresponds with the findings of some studies that the absence of a response, especially to a negative

review, was seen as a negative behaviour which could lead to negative emotions such as anger and frustration (McColl-Kennedy and Sparks, 2003). Therefore, the thesis suggests that firms should respond to reviews in order to prevent negative perceptions. However, some scholars have suggested otherwise, due to the fact that a response to a negative review can serve as a further reminder of the complaint. Therefore, they suggest that firms ought to give no response to negative reviews, because even if the response were utterly persuasive so that consumers form the intended perception, this perception is still less positive than others that might be formed in the absence of a response (Tybout, Calder and Sternthal, 1981). Further research should scrutinise this issue, perhaps through an experiment, to uncover consumers' feelings towards no response. This knowledge is important so that marketers can firmly build a response (or no response) strategy, without hesitation.

6.5   Concluding remarks and reflections

This thesis has provided new insights into online consumer reviews and firms' interventions. It has shown how potential guests, reviewers and hospitality firms experience contrasting effects simultaneously. It has also shown how they adopt a number of different strategies to maximise benefits while minimising negative effects. As one participant stated, online consumer reviews can be seen as a double-edged sword which can both hurt and benefit a hotel. The same also applies to consumers (i.e., potential guests and reviewers). Whilst they benefit from easy access to information, at the same time they can also suffer confusion resulting from information overload.

As the proliferation of the internet and heavy use of social media have made searching for information easier and more cost effective, consumers are faced with an abundance of reviews. They need to learn and adopt strategies in order to choose information that will aid their decision-making process. The utilisation of such strategies is important because by choosing the right information, they will have a greater likelihood of being satisfied. On the other hand, the abundance of information from reviews can also be used by hospitality firms to improve their offering. Hospitality firms can just ignore reviews, but their reputations are at stake. Therefore, for all players in the tourism and hospitality industry, online consumer reviews are something that cannot be avoided. Both consumers (i.e., potential guests and reviewers) and hospitality firms should embrace them.

Lastly, even though the effect of responding to reviews varies, and responding requires a lot of effort from hospitality firms, firms are still likely to be better off if they respond to reviews. Though review monitoring can be done by some applications or computer programs,

replying to reviews, unfortunately, has to be done by individuals with personalised messages. Hotels need to start investing in monitoring programs/applications and assigning dedicated managerial personnel to provide responses, while also adopting some of the strategies suggested by the thesis. It is my hope and wish that the thesis will help consumers and hospitality firms to cope with the rapid changes to the online environment, so that consumers and firms can maximise the benefits of online reviews.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide for reviewers

QUESTIONS	AIM	SOURCE
Hi, nice to meet you. Thank you for participating in this study. Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself? What do you do?		
How many vacations do you usually have per year?	Background information	
Can you please tell me a little bit about how you choose your hotel for the holiday?	Background information	
How did you know what to expect from a hotel?	Background information	
How did you know that the hotel will be OK?	Background information	
Information source?	Background information	
They usually will talk about their experience in using the review sites, so dig deeper about the reviews:		
About the motivation in reading a review		
Could you please share your experience in reading a review?	Background information	Parasuraman, Berry
Which review site do you use most often? Why?	Background information	
Why did you read the review? What made you read the review?	Background information	
How many reviews have you read? Did you always read review before making a booking?	Background information	
How far will you read them? Did you read them carefully?	RQ2	
Do you trust them?	RQ4	(Keates, 2007)
How do you decide which review to read and which one to ignore?	RQ2	
Did you always make a decision based on the reviews that you read?	RQ1	Parasuraman, Berry
What happen after you read a review? Did you change your expectation?	RQ1, RQ4	
About the motivation in posting a review		
Could you please share your experience in writing a review?	Background information	
How many reviews have you written?	Background information	
Why did you write a review?	Background information	(Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004)
Did you contact the hotel first before writing the review?	Background information	
Was it a positive or negative experience which drives you to post a review?	RQ4	
What did you feel after posting the review?	RQ4	

About the timing of the review		
When did you post your review? Is there any reason behind the specific time chosen to post the review?	Background information	(Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Díaz-Armas, 2011)
Did you post the review during the visit or after a visit?	Background information	
About the response from the company		
Have your review(s) received a reply from the company?	RQ1	
What do you think about the response from the company to your review?	RQ1	(Tripp & Grégoire, 2011)
How did the company follow up?	RQ1	
Did the response resolve the complaint?	RQ1	
What has it made you feel?	RQ1	(Tripp & Grégoire, 2011); (Ma, Sun, & Kekre, 2015); (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009)
Did you feel satisfy or you felt that you want to complaint more because you did not receive satisfactory response from the company?	RQ1, RQ4	
About the message from the company		
Who usually answer your review(s)?	RQ3	(Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013); (Min, Lim, & Magnini, 2015); (Bradley & Sparks, 2009)
Can you name their job title?	RQ3	
What do you think about it? How did it make you feel?	RQ3	
What kind of reply did you receive from the company?	RQ3	
What do you think about the reply itself? (clear and concise, long and explanatory, friendly tone, like a machine, etc)	RQ1, RQ3	(Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013)
How did the reply make you feel?	RQ1, RQ4	(Cheng & Loi, 2014)
What kind of reply did you prefer?	RQ1	
About the response timing		
How long was it until you received a reply from the company?	RQ3	(van Noort & Willemsen, 2012); (Min, Lim, & Magnini, 2015)
What do you think about that?	RQ1	
What is the appropriate time for a response?	RQ1	
About the service quality model		
What happen after you post a review? Did you feel relieve?	RQ4	Parasuraman, Berry
Did the reply change your perception about the company's service quality?	RQ4	
How did the reply change the satisfaction that you already had before?	RQ4	

Appendix B Interview guide for potential guests

QUESTIONS	AIM	SOURCE
Hi, nice to meet you. Thank you for participating in this study. Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself? What do you do?	Background information	
How many vacations do you usually have per year?	Background information	
Can you please tell me a little bit about how you choose your accommodation for the holiday?	Background information	
How do you know about the hotel's quality?	Background information	Parasuraman, Berry
Who / what is your information source?	Background information	
When do you know that you have enough information?	RQ2	
About the motivation in reading a review		
Could you please share your experience in reading a review?	RQ2	
Which review site do you use most often? Why?	RQ2	
Why did you read the review? What made you read the review?	RQ1	Parasuraman, Berry
How many reviews have you read? Did you always read review before making a booking?	RQ2	
Do you trust them?	RQ1	(Keates, 2007)
How do you decide which review to read and which one to ignore?	RQ2	
Did you always make a decision based on the reviews that you read?	RQ1	Parasuraman, Berry
What happen after you read a review? Did you change your expectation?	RQ1	
About the response from the company		
Have you seen a review which received a reply?	RQ1	
What has the response from the company to a review made you feel?	RQ1	
If you see a reply to a negative review, does it make you feel less negative about the company?	RQ1	(Tripp & Grégoire, 2011); (Ma, Sun, & Kekre, 2015); (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009)
How about if you see a reply for a positive review?	RQ1	
Will the response change your opinion about the hotel?	RQ1	
Did you expect the company to give a reply?	RQ1	Parasuraman, Berry
About the message from the company		

Did you notice who usually answer the reviews?	RQ3	(Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013); (Min, Lim, & Magnini, 2015); (Bradley & Sparks, 2009)
Did the source of the response matter to you?	RQ3	
Who do you prefer?	RQ3	
Will it make any difference?	RQ3	
What kind of reply did you notice the company gave to the reviews?	RQ3	
What kind of reply do you prefer?	RQ3	(Cheng & Loi, 2014)
How do you feel about it? Has the reply change your initial perception about the hotel?	RQ4	(Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013)
About the response timing		
Have you noticed the time of the response?	RQ3	(van Noort & Willemsen, 2012); (Min, Lim, & Magnini, 2015)
What do you think about the timing of the response?	RQ3	
What do you think is the appropriate time for a response?	RQ3	
About the service quality model		
Did the reply change your perception about the company's service quality?	RQ4	Parasuraman, Berry
How?	RQ4	

Appendix C: Interview guide for hospitality firms

QUESTIONS	AIM	SOURCE
Hi, nice to meet you. Thank you for participating in this study. Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself? Could you please share your opinion about the consumer review in social media?	Background information	
About the review		
Which review site do you think has the most impact to the hotel's reputation?	RQ1	(Keates, 2007)
What do you think about the fake reviews?	RQ1	
How do you recognise the fake one from the real one?	RQ2	
Was it a positive or negative review which you give more attention to?	RQ2	(Tripp & Grégoire, 2011); (Ma, Sun, & Kekre, 2015); (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009)
In what way does the review influence your hotel?	RQ1, RQ4	
About the response from the company		
Could you please share your experience in responding to a review?	RQ3	(Tripp & Grégoire, 2011); (Ma, Sun, & Kekre, 2015); (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009)
In which site(s) that you put your response on?	RQ3	
Why do you give response to the review?	RQ1	
Could you please tell me about the procedure in handling the review in social media?	RQ3	
How do you decide which review to reply and which one to ignore?	RQ2, RQ3	
Have you asked the reviewer or other tourists about their perception of your response?	RQ3	
Have you or your hotel actually contacted the reviewer because of their review?	RQ3	
About the message (including the source) from the company		
Who usually give response to the review? Why?	RQ3	(McCabe, Li and Chen, 2016)
Is it always the same person?	RQ3	
Do you usually give the same type of response or do you modify it every time? Is it individualised?	RQ3	
Is it part of the marketing strategy?	RQ3	
Who is responsible for monitoring TripAdvisor?	RQ3	
About the response timing		
What is the time frame in responding to the review?	RQ3	

When will you start ignoring the review?	RQ3	(van Noort & Willemsen, 2012); (Min, Lim, & Magnini, 2015)
About the involvement and level of engagement		
What do you think about the reviewers' level of engagement to the hotel?	RQ1	(McCabe, Li and Chen, 2016)
What do you think about the potential tourists' level of engagement to the hotel?	RQ1	
What do you think about the reviewers' involvement to the hotel?	RQ1	
What do you think about the involvement to the hotel?	RQ1	
How do you nurture customer's engagement to your hotel?	RQ1, RQ4	
About the service quality model		
Before the online consumer reviews exist, how did you form your perception about the consumer's expectation of your service?	RQ4	Parasuraman, Berry
How does it change when the review exists?	RQ4	
How do you think the review has change the service quality of your hotel?	RQ4	
How do you think your response to the review has change the service quality of your hotel?	RQ4	

Appendix D: Information for research participants (reviewers)

Nottingham University
Business School

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Information for Research Participants

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research project. Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you may change your mind about being involved in the research at any time, and without giving a reason.

This information sheet is designed to give you full details of the research project, its goals, the research team, the research funder, and what you will be asked to do as part of the research. If you have any questions that are not answered by this information sheet, please ask.

This research has been reviewed and given favourable opinion by the Nottingham University Business School Research Ethics Committee.

What is the research project called?

> A Study on Firms' Intervention in an Online Consumer Review Site and Its Effect on Service Recovery

Who is carrying out the research?

> Heppy Millanyani
>
> A PhD student in the Business School and the researcher is sponsored by the Directorate General of Higher Education, Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education of Indonesia

What is the research about?

This study is about an online consumer reviews in TripAdvisor and how a response from the hotel influences the service quality model. The researcher will interview three groups of people in this environment (the reviewers, potential tourists and hotel management) and combine the answers to give a better understanding about how the review and its response affect the service quality model. In the end, the study aims to propose a suitable procedure for responding to a review and to give suggestions to hospitality firms regarding crafting the message for the response.

What groups of people have been asked to take part, and why?

I am interested in collecting data from individuals who have posted a hotel review which received a response from the hotel on TripAdvisor. I am also interested in understanding your experience in writing the review and the reason behind it. I would like to know your feelings and emotions when you received a response from the hotel and what you thought about the message. Did it change your opinion about the hotel? And why was that?

Your review in the online consumer review site may be used as a stimulus for the experiment part of the study and may be used for further analysis in the study.

What will research participants be asked to do?

You will be interviewed for approximately one hour. The interviews as well as your consent will be recorded. Your participation in the interview is voluntary and you may decide to stop the interview at any point without giving reasons and you can also decide not to answer any individual questions during the interview.

What will happen to the information I provide?

Data will be stored on a personal computer, encrypted and password protected. Data will only be accessed by the researcher and their supervisor(s). Names will be replaced by pseudonyms. No personal information will be revealed to any party. However, with your

permission, age, gender, background and direct quotes might be used for the purpose of analysis.

What will be the outputs of the research?

Research thesis, journal papers, conference publications and book chapters.

Contact details

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Complaint procedure

If you wish to complain about the way in which the research is being conducted or have any concerns about the research then in the first instance please contact the *[Heppy Millanyani]*.

Or contact the School's Research Ethics Officer:

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Appendix E: Information for research participants (potential guests)

Nottingham University
Business School

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Information for Research Participants

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research project. Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you may change your mind about being involved in the research at any time, and without giving a reason.

This information sheet is designed to give you full details of the research project, its goals, the research team, the research funder, and what you will be asked to do as part of the research. If you have any questions that are not answered by this information sheet, please ask.

This research has been reviewed and given favourable opinion by the Nottingham University Business School Research Ethics Committee.

What is the research project called?

A Study on Firms' Intervention in an Online Consumer Review Site and Its Effect on Service Recovery

Who is carrying out the research?

Heppy Millanyani

A PhD student in the Business School and the researcher is sponsored by the Directorate General of Higher Education, Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education of Indonesia

What is the research about?

This study is about an online consumer reviews in TripAdvisor and how a response from the hotel influences the service quality model. The researcher will interview three groups of people in this environment (the reviewers, potential tourists and hotel management) and combine the answers to give a better understanding about how the review and its response affect the service quality model. In the end, the study aims to propose a suitable procedure for responding to a review and to give suggestions to hospitality firms regarding crafting the message for the response.

What groups of people have been asked to take part, and why?

I am interested in collecting data from individuals who have read a hotel review which received a response from the hotel on TripAdvisor. I am also interested in knowing your experience in reading the review. I would like to know your feelings and emotions when you read a review which has received a response from the hotel. What did you think about the message? Did it change your opinion about the hotel? Was the response necessary? And why was that?

Your answers are important to inform the hotel and other marketers about consumer service quality assessment and how the review, as part of a large amount of information on the market, can influence it.

What will research participants be asked to do?

You will be interviewed for approximately one hour. The interviews as well as your consent will be recorded. Your participation in the interview is voluntary and you may decide to stop the interview at any point without giving reasons. You can also decide not to answer any individual questions during the interview.

During the interview, I will also give you a number of example of hotel reviews and their corresponding responses. You will be asked about your opinion of each of the examples and in the end, we will reach a conclusion about which response is the most appropriate.

What will happen to the information I provide?

Data will be stored on a personal computer, encrypted and password protected. Data will only be accessed by the researcher and their supervisor(s). Names will be replaced by pseudonyms. No personal information will be revealed to any party. However, with your permission, age, gender, background and direct quotes might be used for the purpose of analysis.

What will be the outputs of the research?

Research thesis, journal papers, conference publications and book chapters.

Contact details

Researcher :   Heppy Millanyani

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Complaint procedure

If you wish to complain about the way in which the research is being conducted or have any concerns about the research then in the first instance please contact the *[Heppy Millanyani]*.

Or contact the School's Research Ethics Officer:

Adam Golberg

Nottingham University Business School

Jubilee Campus

Nottingham NG8 1BB

Phone: 0115 846 6604

Email: adam.golberg@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix F: Information for research participants (hospitality firms)

Nottingham University
Business School

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Information for Research Participants

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research project. Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you may change your mind about being involved in the research at any time, and without giving a reason.

This information sheet is designed to give you full details of the research project, its goals, the research team, the research funder, and what you will be asked to do as part of the research. If you have any questions that are not answered by this information sheet, please ask.

This research has been reviewed and given favourable opinion by the Nottingham University Business School Research Ethics Committee.

What is the research project called?

A Study on Firms' Intervention in an Online Consumer Review Site and Its Effect on Service Recovery

Who is carrying out the research?

Heppy Millanyani

A PhD student in the Business School and the researcher is sponsored by the Directorate General of Higher Education, Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education of Indonesia

What is the research about?

This study is about an online consumer reviews in TripAdvisor and how a response from the hotel influences the service quality model. The researcher will interview three groups of people in this environment (the reviewers, potential tourists and hotel management) and combine the answers to give a better understanding about how the review and its response affect the service quality model. In the end, the study aims to propose a suitable procedure for responding to a review and to give suggestions to hospitality firms regarding crafting the message for the response.

What groups of people have been asked to take part, and why?

I am interested in collecting data from a representative of hotel management who has given a response to a review on TripAdvisor. I am also interested in knowing your experience in responding to the review. In addition, I would like to understand the hotel's procedure in handling reviews: who gives the reply, how and why? I would also like to know what you consider in crafting the message for the response and the reasons behind it. Finally, I hope to ascertain how reviews in TripAdvisor affect the way the hotel think about its consumers and how it will eventually affect all of its operations.

Your reply in the online consumer review site may be used as a stimulus for the experiment part of the study and may be used for further analysis in the study.

What will research participants be asked to do?

You will be interviewed for approximately one hour. The interviews as well as your consent will be recorded. Your participation in the interview is voluntary and you may decide to stop the interview at any point without giving reasons. You can also decide not to answer any individual questions during the interview.

What will happen to the information I provide?

Data will be stored on a personal computer, encrypted and password protected. Data will only be accessed by the researcher and their supervisor(s). Names will be replaced by pseudonyms. No personal information will be revealed to any party. However, with your permission, age, gender, background and direct quotes might be used for the purpose of analysis.

What will be the outputs of the research?

Research thesis, journal papers, conference publications and book chapters.

Contact details

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Complaint procedure

If you wish to complain about the way in which the research is being conducted or have any concerns about the research then in the first instance please contact the *[Heppy Millanyani]*.

Or contact the School's Research Ethics Officer:

Adam Golberg

Nottingham University Business School

Jubilee Campus

Nottingham NG8 1BB

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Email: adam.golberg@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix G: Research ethics review checklist

Nottingham University
Business School

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

NOTTINGHAM UNIVERSITY BUSINESS SCHOOL

RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW CHECKLIST – STAFF AND DOCTORAL RESEARCH

Research ethics approval is required for every research project that involves human participants or their data, whether that project is externally funded or not. Research projects may not start without ethical approval.

Please complete this form electronically and email it to stella.fuller@nottingham.ac.uk along with any annexes, from your UoN email account. For advice and guidance on completing this form, please contact adam.golberg@nottingham.ac.uk

Research Project Title:	A Study on Firms' Intervention in an Online Consumer Review Site and Its Effect on Service Quality

Staff research		Student research	**PhD** / MBA / MSc/ Undergraduate

Please tick the appropriate box. For student research, please highlight your programme above and enter your supervisor as a co-investigator below.

Principal Investigator	Heppy Millanyani
Co-Investigators (and affiliation)	Professor Scott McCabe and Dr Jillian Rickly
Project Funder(s)	Directorate General of Higher Education, Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education of Indonesia

Project start/finish dates	October 2015 until 2018	Date of Ethics Application	24.01.2017

Questions about the appropriate REC to review the application:		
Will the study involve recruitment of patients through the NHS or the use of NHS data or premises and/or equipment?	Y	N
Does the study involve participants age 16 or over who are unable to give informed consent? (e.g., people with learning disabilities)	Y	N

If the answer to either of these questions is 'yes', then you will need to seek approval through an NHS Research Ethics Committee – the School Committee cannot review your project. Please contact the University's Research Governance and Ethics team, sponsor@nottingham.ac.uk (and cc adam.golberg@nottingham.ac.uk).

NUBS LREC cannot approve projects which involve: the administration of drugs, placebos etc to research participants; tissue collection; the infliction of pain; or invasive, intrusive or harmful procedures. Please contact Adam and the Sponsor address as above for info.

Questions about involvement of researchers from outside NUBS:		
Are researchers from another school or institution involved in the project?	Y	N
If no, please move on to the next section. If yes, please answer either:		
are leading the project, does this application cover their involvement?	Y	N
are not leading has approval for your involvement been obtained?	Y	N

If a project is led from outside NUBS, ethical approval by the principal investigator's institution will normally be accepted instead of a NUBS REC review. In such cases, just complete this page and attach a letter confirming ethical review. Similarly, NUBS REC will normally be willing to write to external project partners to confirm that we have reviewed the project. It would be up to their respective institutions to decide whether to accept our review or to carry out their own – you should not assume agreement.

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University of Nottingham's Code of Practice on Ethical Standards and any relevant academic or professional

guidelines in the conduct of your study. **This includes providing appropriate information sheets and consent forms, and ensuring confidentiality in the storage and use of data**.

Any significant change in the question, design or conduct over the course of the research should be notified to the School Research Ethics Officer (adam.golberg@nottingham.ac.uk) and may require a new application.

<u>Brief</u> summary of project goals:

This research will explore the perspectives of three actors (reviewers, potential tourists, and hospitality firms) on how the presence of online consumer reviews (e.g., on TripAdvisor), and the intervention from companies in response to these reviews, influence consumers' service quality assessment. The research aims to propose appropriate procedures for responding to reviews, as well as suggesting the kind of persuasive message needed for the process. Furthermore, the results of the research are expected to improve understandings of how reviews and hotelier's responses influence the service quality model and potential tourists' expectations.

<u>Brief</u> description of research methods to be employed:

Observations of the reviews and its reply on online consumer review site will be conducted to learn about the behaviour of the hospitality firms and the reviewers. These observations will also be used to choose a number of reviews and its consequent reply for the experiment stage of the study. These selected reviews and reply may not be written by the respondents interviewed for the study therefore the researcher may not be able to retain the consent to use them. However, since TripAdvisor is a public domain which means all of its information are available to be consumed by the public, this consent will not be needed. Furthermore, the researcher will maintain anonymity of the selected reviews and its reply by eliminating the name of the reviewers and the hotel, the name of known place and also redact the title of the reviews. This is important to make sure that it cannot be traced back to its original message on the review site.

A number of semi-structured interviews will be conducted to potential tourists, reviewers and hospitality firms who are residing in the UK. Interviews and the participant's consent will be digitally recorded. Participants may be asked to fill in the form to obtain demographic data.

Questions about consent	Y	N
Does the research involve vulnerable groups: children, those with cognitive impairment, or those in unequal power relationships (e.g., students)	Y	N
Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited? (e.g., students at school, members of self-help group, residents of nursing home, employees)	Y	N
Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and/or full informed consent at the time? (e.g., covert observation)?	Y	N
Questions about confidentiality		
Will research involve the sharing of data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given? Will data collected be (or potentially be) used for any other purpose?	Y	N
Will the research involve administrative or secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use?	Y	N
Will any payments, compensation, expenses, or incentives be offered to participants?	Y	N
Questions about the potential for harm		
Will the study involve discussion of personal or sensitive topics (e.g., sexual activity, drug use, commercially or legally sensitive topics)?	Y	N
Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?	Y	N
Is there a possibility that the safety of the researcher may be in question beyond everyday risks (e.g., in some international research in trouble spots)?	Y	N

Location of the research		
Will any of the research take place outside the UK?	Y	N

If you have answered 'yes' to any of the questions above, please explain your reasons below, and any steps you will take to deal with the ethical issues raised. Please note that answering 'yes' will not in itself adversely affect the chances of approval. For guidance on completing this section of the form, please contact adam.golberg@nottingham.ac.uk

As mentioned earlier, the researcher will perform online observation over online consumer review site, on the reviews and its reply, to learn about the reviewers and hospitality firms' behaviour. This observation is also needed to select a number of review and reply for experimental purpose and analysis.

This observation will possibly be done without the reviewers and hospitality firms' consent because the content of the site (the review and its reply) are not highly sensitive and are meant to be consumed by the general public as its purpose is to provide information for potential tourists before they are making their purchase decision.

To what degree will individual research participants and organisations be anonymised in the research outputs? Please list any potentially-identifying characteristics that you may wish to use. Please attach a copy of your participant information sheet and/or consent form (where appropriate) as annexes.

Names will not be revealed. However, their age, gender, educational qualification and background are essential to the analysis and interpretation and will therefore be part of the thesis and research papers. Specific permission will be sought for this when recruiting participants.

In regard to the selected reviews and its reply used for the study, search engines will be used to find out whether it can be directed to its original message. Furthermore, the researcher will hide the names of the reviewer, the hospitality

firms and the name of the hotels as well as the name of known place to make sure that the participants will stay anonymous. Some paraphrasing will also be performed when needed.

Useful links:

A link to the University of Nottingham Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics (log in required) can be found at:

https://workspace.nottingham.ac.uk/display/ResEth/Code+of+Research+Conduct+and+Research+Ethics

UoN online course – Global research ethics and integrity (self-paced moodle course)
http://moodle.nottingham.ac.uk/enrol/index.php?id=7141

ESRC Framework for Research Ethics

http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/

UK Research Integrity Office Code of Practice for Research

http://ukrio.org/publications/code-of-practice-for-research/

Appendix H: Coding summary "don't complain directly but write a review"

Files\\Interviews\\Hoteliers\\Hart's Hotel

2 references coded, 0.61% coverage

Reference 1: 0.26% coverage

people don't come to the reception and say I've got this issue, ==they put it on TripAdvisor afterwards.==

Reference 2: 0.35% coverage

you had a chat with someone in the morning and they will say 'yes, it's fine, I enjoyed it' and ==then you find them on TripAdvisor afterwards==

Files\\Interviews\\Hoteliers\\Jurys Inn

1 reference coded, 0.57% coverage

Reference 1: 0.57% coverage

had I have known before they check out, we would've done it there and then but ==they didn't. They just go to Tripadvisor==

Files\\Interviews\\Hoteliers\\Nottingham Belfry

1 reference coded, 0.71% coverage

Reference 1: 0.71% coverage

we definitely had a couple of instances where people are still staying in the hotel and ==rather than speak to myself== or the duty manager when they have an issue, they'll be in their bedroom, ==typing on TripAdvisor== because their heating is not working or they don't have their room service yet.

Files\\Interviews\\Hoteliers\\St James Hotel

1 reference coded, 0.71% coverage

Reference 1: 0.71% coverage

Quite often that person <mark>hasn't given us the opportunity to try and resolve the problem</mark> in the first instance and there are people like that out there, that are quite happy just to not say anything, but <mark>then get behind a computer,</mark> they hide behind it to, to give their opinions.

Files\\Interviews\\Hoteliers\\The Beeches Hotel

1 reference coded, 1.54% coverage

Reference 1: 1.54% coverage

a lot of the time the guest <mark>just choose to go home and write a review instead of speaking to us</mark> at the hotel or during the stay. Sometimes you get people who have been with us for a week and not mentioned a single thing and then they go around and write the review

Files\\Interviews\\Reviewers\\Aisyah

1 reference coded, 0.43% coverage

Reference 1: 0.43% coverage

if I went back to the reception and complained, he would not be really happy, so <mark>I just put on my laptop and just complained,</mark>

Files\\Interviews\\Reviewers\\John Rabone

1 reference coded, 0.46% coverage

Reference 1: 0.46% coverage

if it was something small, <mark>I wouldn't directly complain maybe, I would just write about it</mark> and then it's up to them if they want to respond to it.

A: Some of the kind of the criticising feedback, the constructive criticism that we receive from customers, they're things that we know are there, that we've actually got a plan in place to put right. So the idea is to actually respond to those reviews once the fix is in place. There's two reasons for that. One of them is to acknowledge to the customer that we accept what they're saying and the thing is, with things like TripAdvisor, you've normally already dealt with the customer. You've normally already dealt with, if it was not a positive experience, they hopefully, nine times out of ten, come and tell you, and you're able to have that dialogue with them. But then when they don't tell you, and that's the first you know about it when that review comes online, from my point of view, I like to be able to say, yep, here's the fix and we understand that maybe the wall of that room looks a little bit rough. We know that and we fixed it and here's a picture of it now fixed. So I'm purposefully hanging fire on some of the feedback responses because I want to be able to tell the story for the full journey. So yes, sorry that you didn't enjoy how it was when you stayed. We recognise that that's an issue and here it is fixed, and that's more for the customers of tomorrow. So when someone's making a decision of where they want to make a booking, and if they are the kind of person that will look at third party review websites, I think it's quite key for them, not only to see the acknowledgement of the issue, but then also to see the resolution, and then hopefully that informs their buying decisions. I hope anyway,.

I: Yes, because beside talking to hoteliers, I also talk to the reviewers and also [sounds like board insured tourists 2:08] who write these reviews. So a lot of them read the reviews and inform their decisions very much.

A: Thank you, Nadia. Thank you very much. Yes, yeah. And through the course of your research, do you get the data back that tells you that people are relying on them more or are people relying on them less? What do you see as the appetite towards them?

I: Well, yes.

A: To me, and to you.

I: Well, it's kind of like the way… so a lot of them rely on the review sites a lot because they don't find relevant information on the website, from the property itself. So they also, for example, they want to know about the cleanliness of the hotel. It doesn't show on the website, right.

A: Of course.

I: And also about the security of the place and about the staff, so that is the most important thing that they can find from the review sites. And also about the location itself. From the website, you know about the address but then you don't know about the surrounding locations.

A: Sure, okay.

I: So that's why they prefer to also read these review sites.

A: Right, okay.

I: Yeah, so it's very important.

A: And that's very valuable for us, actually, because it helps us to understand the kinds of thing that we need to be adding as the content on to the website. So for instance, like you say, it's not just putting your address and your postcode on there. It's about us saying we are down the bottom of a lane, in a rural location with fields around us and we have got some neighbours. Painting that picture so that people foresee what it is they're going to be coming to. Okay.

I: Yeah.

A: Interesting.

I: Yes, and also they find it useful about the staff.

A: Yes, okay.

I: And they can have that information from the review, not from the website itself.

A: Okay, that's interesting. Good. And how long has this study been going on for and how much have you got left to do? Is it a big piece of work, is it?

I: Yes. It's pretty much my whole PhD, so I am going to have… For the PhD itself, it should be three years but sometimes we have to have additional six months to write up all of the findings.

A: Big piece of work.

I: So how long do you think we have the time for this interview?

A:	Well, to be honest with you… I was going to check your phone, I'll check my phone. I've got a good hour. Is that okay?

I:	Yes, okay.

A:	Good, good.

I:	Okay. So do you want to read this information for participant first? Well, basically it's…

A:	Is it just an overview?

I:	Yes.

A:	No, I'm happy to… I'm perfectly at ease and willing to answer any question that you've got. So no, I'm perfectly happy to proceed. Let me just close that door though, it's a bit chilly and they're moving some furniture around.

I:	Okay, thank you. Okay, so in this sheet, it also tells you that my research has been approved by the ethical committee of the university.

A:	Okay, yeah.

I:	So it's not like…

A:	Someone coming in from the street and asking us questions.

I:	So I know that we've touched this kind of… we talk about this earlier, but we have a…

A:	Of course, yeah.

I:	So maybe you could tell me a little bit about yourself.

A:	Sure, yeah.

I:	And then your role in this hotel for a little bit?

A:	My career in hospitality started through my family. I grew up with quite a lot of my family working in hospitality, so my grandmother worked in a hotel in Grantham, which is where she met my grandfather. He worked there as well. So I grew up working in my aunty's café, during summer holidays and hospitality has very much had a place through my life, not

necessarily my career. And then eight years ago, the opportunity came up for my wife and I to take control of a hotel in Newark, which at the time of the recession, was failing. So we basically took control of the hotel in Newark, which is called "X" Hotel, and spent five years redeveloping that business, so pretty much starting from scratch.

We added a function space similar to the function room that we've added here. We redeveloped the bedrooms, we added bedrooms and we built up a good solid business on the foundations of being a family owned business, as business owners heavily involved in the day to day operation and the customers and the suppliers and the team that worked for us.

Three and half, four years ago, because of the success of "X", and the things that we had learned and the ambitions that we had, we decided to take on a second property. So we searched and we found eventually "Y", which in lots of ways was in a similar position to "X" when we brought that. So it wasn't trading very well. It was struggling because of under investment and lack of attention the business that it could be.

So the last three and half years have been very much about going through a process of improvement here at "Y", to emulate and build on the success that we've already experienced at "X". We still have "X" and that still runs very successfully and in the last three years, our attention has very much been split between the two sites. So our role has changed. The nature of how we operate has changed. We've grown our team of senior managers, so that we're now not operationally involved in the business.

So that's been tough, because that's removed us a little bit from customers and that's removed us a little bit from the team, compared to how we used to do things. But the focus has changed more now, because we've been concentrating on planning, conservation matters. We now have to deal with different things as part of our job role, so I suppose in the last few years, it's very much changed where we oversee everything rather than physically getting stuck in and doing them.

So things like guest feedback and reviews are probably more important to us now than they were because it gives us a clear and defined view point into how our guests are experiencing our business, because we're not at the reception desk checking them out every morning. We're not looking after them when we arrive, our team are, who do a great job and we trust, but yeah, it is that.

We're now, consciously because we want to grow our business, have kind of taken a little bit of a step back away from the customer facing side of things. So things like review websites,

the emails we get from customers after they're departed from us or we always send all of our customers an email after they've left, saying thank you for your stay. If you decide to come back to us, here is a code that you can give us, a reference, that will give you a bottle of wine or a little bit of a discount next time you come back. Try and build that customer loyalty.

Normally that will give us a response back as well, so we're still connected to the customers, albeit in a different way than we were.

I: Okay. So that is why you want to answer this review by yourself, because you want to be involved with the customer?

A: Yeah, because we want that connection and we still provide ourselves on being an independent company, and a small business. We are still a small business and the fact that we're independent, the fact that we're family owned, the customers that use us and are happy to part with their hard earned money, for us to offer our services to them, I think it's important if there is an issue or if there's something really good, that we still get to find out about it.

I: Hmm.

A: Because at the end of the day, that's what feedback is all about to me anyway. It's about hearing the good, hearing the bad, celebrating the good and trying to work on fixing any negatives, so that they don't happen again. Because this, for us, is the next ten, 15, 20 years of our lives and we want to do a good job of it and we want to grow the business and keep benefitting from the success that doing a good job of things has brought us. So it is important that we listen to what people tell us.

I: Okay. Don't you have like general manager or…?

A: Yep.

I: But you decide that you are the one who will respond to this? And why is that?

A: We kind of do it together. I think most of the time, if a guest has got feedback for us on site, then it will be the general manager or even the duty manager, whoever's on site at that time, will deal with it as best they can. If it can't be dealt with by them for whatever reason, then it would go up to the general manager, and every now and again, if he feels he can't bring it to a satisfactory resolution, then he may refer it to me.

So we work very much as a team together, but I suppose the TripAdvisor ones, specifically, because obviously there's loads of channels for feedback, isn't there, and they grow everyday it seems like. But I suppose, TripAdvisor is the one, certainly in the past that has been the biggest and possibly the most influential of all of the feedback sites because it's truly independent. A lot of the other ones are done through, for instance, through the third party booking channels, like Booking.com, LateRoom, Trivago, HNCO, whoever it is.

They're all linked to the booking partner, whereas TripAdvisor stands on its own, or at least it did until they started trying to delve into all the other elements of the business. I suppose when I started doing the TripAdvisor feedback, it was me. There was no general manager at the time, and I like to keep input into certain parts of the business, and whereas they probably get a speedier response if it was the general manager's job or the duty manager's job. I suppose, I like to still have, from a customer point of view, I suppose I still like people, when they're looking at our business to see the owner still interested.

Does that make sense? So the time is still being made by the person who is responsible for the business, to listen to that feedback and respond, because ultimately and I don't mean this as any disrespect to any other team, but anyone of the people that works for us could walk out the door tomorrow and never come back. So it's their job role that's answering that feedback, whereas for me, as the owner, I know that someone who looks at a review on TripAdvisor looks at a review feedback five years ago at "X", will see my name on it. If they look at a review feedback, if I were to be up to date with them today, it would still be my name on it.

So I suppose it's that consistency and that continuity that I feel is important, because we're proud of the businesses as well. So it is kind of about taking ownership and responsibility, I think, for the good and the bad and it keeps us sharp and it keeps us educated and abreast of what's going on in the business.

I: You are the one who do the reply itself?

A: Yes.

I: I also interviewed also, not very small, but also independent hotel and the one that is on TripAdvisor, was the owner, but apparently the one who has been doing…

A: Someone else has been doing it.

I: Yes, but under his name.

A: That's a brilliant idea, isn't it. I never thought of that. It is me that does them, when I get around to doing them, and I think that from my point of view is because I'm genuinely interested in it. Because it's not paying lip-service. I suppose we could, I suppose employ a reputation management company if we wanted to do that, and I'm sure people do.

We get contacted by them more and more frequently, because I think it's quite a growing business, reputation management and maintaining the right tone of voice, and having the right attitude. Because there are some business owners out there, and I've seen them and I'm sure you've seen them as well, who do not react well to negative feedback.

So you will get that kind of probably a large glass wine and 11 o'clock at night, banging on the keyboard, which I respect actually, because it's the blood, sweat and tears that go into running a business, that when someone comes back and says, there wasn't any soap in the bathroom. It's like, well, look at everything else there is, I don't focus on that. But that's a customer's prerogative, isn't it? They don't care. They're not responsible for anything else, other than enjoying their stay with you. So no, it is, when they're done it is me that does them, because there is a genuine kind of heart-felt desire to do a good job and to make sure that, because the guys that work for us, they might have a different attitude to me on a certain thing.

So for instance, if someone didn't have a good night's sleep, because there was a peacock. We have some peacocks around the area and every now and then, they come and stay with us for a few weeks. We facilitate that. We don't kick them out or try and kill them or anything, but they make a racket. They're loud.

I: Oh, really? During the night?

A: Yeah, yeah. Probably mating season or something like that or if they get lost and they're trying to find their way back to wherever it is they are. They'll make a bit of a racket. Now, one customer might really like that because it makes them feel they're in the countryside and it's something that they'll tell people about and maybe they're a good sleeper anyway, so it's not disturbed them. But then the customer in the next room to them, might be livid, might be furious. How dare you have this horrible noisy creature disturbing my night's sleep.

To the team here, it's day in, day out, so they might say, I'm not even going to bother telling John Paul about that, because they actually really liked it and they didn't really like it, so one good negates the bad and we just forget about it. But actually for that customer who didn't enjoy that, I do think we do have a responsibility to just drop them a quick message and you

go, I'm really sorry that was not great. Maybe next time you come and stay, we'll put you in a room on the other side of the hotel, which we know is a lot quieter.

So the feedback to me is as important to be done directly, so popping a quick email to someone. It's not necessarily about it being for everybody to see, because I think that's the risk, that you do it. If it's not you doing it and you've got no accountability and you don't care about it, you just do it for show.

I'm sure, I don't know whether you've come across any that do this or not, but I've seen hospitality companies out there that basically just have a cut and paste response. Thank you for your feedback. We take anything into consideration. We look forward to welcoming you back. So we could do that as well, but that's just a bit weak, isn't it? Especially when it goes from a glowing review to a really horrific review and you paste the same response and anyone can look at that and go, they don't really care, do they? They're just doing it because they feel that they should.

I: That's the kind of thing that I also get from the reviewers and also the board of tourism.

A: Yeah, because they think you don't care.

I: They don't like it.

A: You want to feel treated as an individual and you want to feel that if you're going to the effort to put that out there, that someone's reading it, yeah, and not treating you with a little bit on contempt, I suppose, maybe.

I: Yes, that's right. Oh, about the hotel itself, do you mind telling me about your target market?

A: Sure. Yeah. So here at "Y", we've got quite a broad spread. So predominantly we can split it into, I would argue, maybe four key areas.

So the first area is wedding and events, so that's a big part of what we're driving the business on the back of. So the large investment that we've put into the function room, specifically to target wedding and events. That could be leisure events or corporate events. So anything that basically brings together more than 30 people is a large target area for us. And since having the function room built and being able to market that, we've seen a significant uplift in the interest into our property from those target markets.

Second area is business traveller. So Monday to Thursday, they're the kind of people that come and stay with us and come and eat with us. So they either work in the area, they're travelling through the area and we're a handy point to be, because of our location and because of the type of property we are. So because a lot of people are single travellers, they don't necessarily want to be in the city in a 200 bedroom hotel, which is really busy and really bustling. They like a little bit of peace and quiet.

We also have leisure/tourism visitors to the area. Obviously Nottingham, Sherwood Forest and we're far enough out of the city to make people feel in a nice tranquil, quiet environment.

I: Yeah, it's really nice when I…

A: Yeah, you feel the difference, don't you, when you come out of Redhill and over the hill, and then all of a sudden, there's a bit of space around. A bit of green and so that's nice. So we're accessible to the city, we're accessible to Mansfield as well, because there's not an enormous hotel provision in Mansfield at all, and we've got lots of nice villages and nice areas around us, that people have got an interest in visiting as part of a wider trip. So we have leisure and tourism customers as well.

But then, I think specifically to us, we have… I don't really know how you'd classify them, but rest and recuperation guests. So we've got the Park Hospital just around the corner, and the Park Hospital do lots of day surgery, but a lot of the surgeries they do, maybe need 24 hours or 48 hours rest and recuperation before someone's comfortable to then travel back home, because they have people come from all over the country.

So because of our proximity to the Park Hospital, we get people coming to stay with us for maybe two or three days, who have either had the operation or who are maybe the spouse or the partner of the person who's had the operation because we are just so convenient to them that it's crazy to go anywhere else.

So from an accommodation side of things, they're the four kind of key markets that we have. I suppose the only other thing really is from a non-residential dining point of view, we have restaurant customers. "Y" very much built its reputation for the first 15 years of its life as a restaurant, as a restaurant with rooms. So it was the food business that really lead and then the accommodation came after it.

I: But now it's…

A: Now it's switched around. Yeah, it has done and there's a number of reasons for that. One of them, it was kind of a conscious decision that we made that we wanted to drive

the business from an events side of things. All of our events, without exception, tend to be exclusive events, and they tend to take up Friday, Saturday, Sundays, which are the key casual dining dates as well.

So if you want to go out to dinner with your family or with friends, or whatever, it tends to be over that weekend period. So by us focusing on the events market, has knowingly and I suppose as a by-product of our decision, purposefully put the restaurant onto a lower footing of importance to us. We're less reliant now on people coming in and dining from a non-residential side of things, because on the key dates that people want to come out and eat, we normally have an event running.

We don't want to do both, because I don't think we would deliver… we're not big enough to deliver a strong enough product on both sides without them getting in each other's ways. So you're trying to enjoy a nice kind of a la carte meal in a quiet environment, but you've got 50 people having photos out on the lawn for their wedding. So the two rub up against each other a little bit too closely for us to be confident we can deliver that product that we want to.

So we'd rather focus on one and do it really well, than try and do everything and it suffer a little bit on the quality.

I: Alright. About competitor, who do you think is your main competitor?

A: Again, I suppose it depends on which segment of the business we're looking at. So if I say how many other businesses of our size that have got roughly a dozen bedrooms, a restaurant and banqueting facility for 100 people in the area, not many. There are bigger places that can do it and there are smaller places that can do some of it, but actually I think we're pretty, not unique because there are others, but from an immediate geographical competitive perspective, I don't think there's very many.

So you've got the Old Vicarage Boutique in Southwell, but they're not open for accommodation and restaurant. They're purely a function venue. So if you're booking their venue, it's yours, but you can't ring up and say I want to come and stay on Wednesday night, do you bed and breakfast? They used to but they drew away from that just to focus on events.

Got Lakeside Tower, just around the corner, which was a very popular wedding venue and restaurant and leisure facility and spa, but they stopped doing weddings when they changed ownership three years ago and they've just closed, because they've just been taken over by new owners. So they're currently not doing anything.

There's lots of nice restaurants around, so there's competition from the dining side of things and I think as well, the dining market has changed such a lot in the last five years, where the fine dining, nice quiet intimate experience that we offer is being quite heavily threatened by the casual dining. You walk into Nottingham, goodness me, the amount of restaurants that pop up week in, week out is incredible and it's all burgers and barbecues. It's the street foods, it's the very casual, very in and out dining, you go and you eat and you go. You're not settling in, in a lot of places for the evening.

It's this kind of fast paced. It's for the youth, predominantly, in the city, especially because it's kind of part of the evening, rather than the whole evening and there's lots of places still that offer fine dining and things that are on an equivalent to what we want to offer, but I think you'd struggle to fine many places that didn't think the market has changed a lot in the last few years, certainly from the casual dining.

And you've even got the old Seven Mile pub round the corner, on the A60 which has just become a Miller and Carter Steakhouse, and they've spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on there and it's a lovely place, and it's family friendly and you can go and you can eat good food and the prices are quite high, but they've created a really strong environment, a really strong branding to that, which supports what they want to deliver from a price point view.

So from a competition side of things, it's more the restaurants that you've got dotted around. You've got Goosedale that do lots of functions and do functions very well. But they don't have accommodation and they don't offer restaurant facilities either. You've got Langar, Langar Hall, which obviously is the pinnacle of hospitality in the area. I don't know if you've spoken to them at Langar?

I: No.

A: Have you not? And obviously, I think they're the ones probably that we would aspire to be seen in the same light as so when people talk about Langar, 99 percent of people love it, but they love it for its non-conformity, because it's an old house. They were very much built on the reputation of Imogen Skirving, who made it a hotel and who ran it until sadly she died. I can't remember if it was last year or the year before. But she was the business and she was Langar, and she created that fantastic product and fantastic business in that country house hotel kind of setting.

So we're slightly different to them in terms of the facilities we have. We've been more, I suppose, purposely focused on the weddings and events by putting that large investment

into the function room. They don't have that facility, but if you said to me, rather than saying who's the competition, who would you like to be seen alongside with and who would you like to be compared to, it would be the kind of business that Langar Hall is.

You've got places like Harts in the city, which are great at what they do but they're a lot bigger than us. they've got Hambleton Hall as well, down in Rutland. I don't know if that's somewhere that you've had a look at at all, and that's Michelin star. That's one of the best hotels in the country, in terms of country house hotels.

But yeah, close to home, I don't mean it from an egotistical point of view, but close to home, there really isn't a direct comparison…

I: Who offer the same…

A: That takes into account everything we do. Yeah, there's lots of people that do a good job and there's lots of people that do some of what we do or more than what we do, because of their size and scale. To pigeonhole a direct nemesis to us, that we're in direct competition with, I don't really see one, if I'm honest. I don't know if that's an unhelpful answer or not.

I: No, it makes sense, because you have this four broad types of customers.

A: Absolutely, yeah. Old houses are expensive to run and old house are very expensive to redevelop because of the planning and conservation and the materials you have to use so we have to be agile. And we have to find ways to be busy, all year round, in order to carry on trading, and it is a competitive market and it's a tough market with wages increasing and taxes increasing and food prices increasing, and insurances are increasing. Nothing's getting cheaper, so we've got to find ways to do what we're doing better than other people around us and well enough to justify the prices that things now cost. So yeah, it's not an easy job but a very rewarding one and one that, I think, if you do it right and if you do it well and if you build it, with a long term approach to the business, it can be a very rewarding one and a very successful business to build.

Yes, just need lots of customers, lots of happy customers. Happy staff and everything to fall into place.

I: Yeah. Okay. So about consumer review itself, can you please tell me a little bit about your opinion, your feeling about this consumer review, in the internet, in the social media? How do you feel about this?

A: Mixed feelings, I think. I think on one had it's great that people have the opportunity to share their experiences, their stories with people. I think it's probably given the industry a much needed shake up in the last ten years, because I think there were lots of people out there, the kind of businesses that aren't dependent on repeat custom. It's probably very easy to get away with no necessarily doing a great job, because you're not reliant on those same people coming back and back again. Before the internet, if you had a terrible experience somewhere, you'd probably tell your family, tell your colleagues and then you'd probably forget about it.

Now you can tell the world and not only can you tell the world, it's there forever. So I think there has been rightly a responsibility and push back onto operators in all industries, not just in hospitality, to be more diligent and to work harder to do a better job. I think the difficult thing is, for us as operators, is that… how can I put this nicely?

You are held responsible for the feelings of an individual who maybe looks at things differently than 99.9 percent of the rest of the world, maybe would. So if someone comes in… say you walked into this room and you went, this is a lovely room. Have you done this room? It's lovely. Someone else might walk into this room and go, oh my goodness me, this room is horrific. I refuse to stay in this room for five minutes longer.

Now, you guys both put your reviews online. I think there's the risk that someone will look at that review and maybe look at the review that was, yeah, I walked into the room and it was really nice. It'd be quite happy to go there again. Then you've just got on with your life and you may come back to that room or not.

But if you've got a review where someone's pressed CAPS lock and gone into a big rant about every single facet of this room that they hated, someone else that's reading that review to make a buying decision and look at the nice review and go, oh, they thought it was quite nice, they though it was alright. They'll look at the bad review, which is really impassioned and we get these people, people out there in the world that are very angry at the smallest of things, but you look at that bad review and you go, ooh, that's a seed of doubt. That's something… what's my opinion? Am I going to walk into that room and am I going to side with the person that likes it or am I going to… actually, yeah, the person that hated it is the kind of person that I am. So actually, I'm not going to take the risk.

That's the side of it that I struggle with. And interestingly, I've seen over the years, I haven't got any data to support this or any metrics or anything else. It's purely a gut feel is that

people use different channels for the type of people that they are, or for the type of message that they're looking to put across.

I personally feel that TripAdvisor is far more likely to attract the type of people that want to complain, than someone that would maybe email us directly or someone who would maybe use Google reviews, or someone that would maybe use Facebook for feedback, and I think part of that is the identity and the reputation that TripAdvisor has created for itself over the years, because it was seen as the guiding light of the consumer champion, wasn't it and they've made TV shows about TripAdvisor complainers and interviewed these people and given you in a window into their lives with them.

So we find that we have different proportion of negative and positive feedback from the different channels that people interact with us on. So with Facebook, we get a lot more positive reviews than negative ones. We get occasional negative ones and that's fine. We're fully accepting that that's life. That's the nature of the beast. When you open your doors to the general public, that's the risk that you take, isn't it.

But if I can say, because when I look at, because I get everything… like everything in life, it all comes to your phone and all pips and pings up, but we will get a lot more, what I consider, balanced feedback on things like Facebook, direct emails and even the third party feedback sites. But we tend to get… we still get positive feedback through TripAdvisor, but we tend to get less positive feedback and more negative feedback, proportionately to the other channels if that makes sense.

I don't know why, but my feeling is two-fold, to answer your original question is, I think it's important it's there and it's right it's there, but I think it's a double-edge sword because I think we as operators can be held hostage by customers to negative feedback which is maybe very specific to them and isn't necessarily reflective of the majority of people's reality.

And you do get your unscrupulous people as well. You will get your people who will come and stay, will find something wrong or will create something wrong because they want a discount, and if you don't give them a discount, they'll then threaten to, oh, I'm going to go on TripAdvisor, I'm going to give you a bad review if you don't give me this discount.

I: So you met people like that, here?

A: Yeah, we have had it. We've had… we've even had people who haven't used us in the past, kind of say it. So we had a situation a while ago where somebody had wanted to make a booking. We told them we were full. They didn't accept that, so they said if you don't

get me a room, they were attending something very close or it could be that they were attending a function here or they were a guest at an event but all the rooms had been taken up by other guests and there weren't any left. They basically said if you can't find me a room, I'm going to give you terrible feedback, and basically wanted us to kick somebody else out, so that they could have a bedroom.

Of course, sadly or positively, depending on the individual you're dealing with, people can either make or break your day. Thankfully the majority are nice, decent people, but occasionally, as with any walk of life, you'll meet people that have got a slightly different way of looking at things.

So, would I rather they were there or not there, review websites, I'd probably rather they weren't there, because there's never more value than actually dealing with the customers directly and I think that's maybe something else that the review sites have done, is they've given people the opportunity to not have to communicate. So if you check into a bedroom and the lightbulb's gone or if you check into a bedroom and you haven't got enough pillows, you didn't use to have a choice but to pick up the phone or go and see someone to deal with that.

Whereas nowadays, you can make the choice to be miserable, leave, then complain and there's so many things can be fixed so we know there's an issue. And again, it purely comes down to personalities and individuals. But again, we have seen it. We've seen it where we've had a review saying something crackers and then I've gone back to the team and said, did I know about this? Oh no, they checked out this morning and said everything was fine.

So you can't do anything about that, but then that is then a record. And it does almost become a record of fact. If it's online, it must be real. So that's a tough one to manage, but then also there are positives that come from it as well, because people do get to see the good side of your business, and ultimately, it's there. There's nothing we can do about it. So you've got to kind of go with the flow. You've got to accept it's there. It's like taxes. They're not going to go, so you've got to pay them, smile and move on.

I: Well, that's also like the same information from other hoteliers that I interviewed. They also said that they preferred the customer to contact them while they're still in there.

A: Absolutely.

I: So they have the chance to rectify the problem, but nowadays people just want to use these review sites.

A: Yeah. Any opportunity to not… we sometimes get, and it's fine because people have different preferences to how they want to communicate, but we'll occasionally get someone who will be in the bedroom, and they'll want room service, so they'll email us for room service. Or they'll send, even worse, this is the one that does drive me bonkers, is they'll send you a Facebook message.

Now, Facebook, as wonderful as it is, isn't something we can man 24 hours a day, because I've got access to it and the general manager has got access to it and one of our sales and marketing ladies has got access to it, but we don't give everybody access to it. So if the general manager's not at his phone or at his computer and the sales and events manager who has access to it isn't at their phone or their computer, and I probably am, but I'll look at it and go, I'm sure someone else will have caught it.

So someone could ask us a question while they're in the building, and it might go unanswered for three hours and then they'll be angry about that.

I: Don't they have phone in their room?

A: Yeah, they've got phones. They've got legs, they've got voices, the whole works, but it has happened.

I: That's funny.

A: And I think people's, in the modern age of communication as well, everyone wants everything instantly, don't they and I'm as bad. I'll send an email and I'll sit there waiting for the response. 'Course you've nothing else with your day, you respond to me straightaway and customers, rightly or wrongly, also share that belief as well. So yeah, we've had emails or private messages from people, you could look out this window and look at the window where they are, but they don't want to necessarily communicate.

So they might be asking for their dinner, and then they're made because it takes an hour to bring them their dinner, but we don't know for 45 minutes that they've even asked that question. The evolution of communication. It would be lovely if everyone still dealt with everything face to face, but again, the world's not going to change around progress, is it? It's only ever going to become more developed unless someone just switches everything off, which I don't think will happen.

I: No, not today. Okay, so besides TripAdvisor or Booking.com, there's a lot of reviews out there. So which review sites do you monitor all the time?

A: So we predominantly monitor, the third-party booking channels that we are part of. Obviously TripAdvisor, Facebook I've mentioned as well. I think to be honest with you, Google is another one, because we have Google accounts for things like analytics to our website and our AdWords advertising campaigns that we run. Because we've got those accounts created and everything is linked in, when someone leaves a review on Google, it sends us an alert, and at that point we'll review that as well.

But we don't… how can I best put it? We don't put time and resource into finding review sites if that makes sense. Because I think if you did that, you'd spend all your time chasing your tail, looking to manage all these different things. So I think we're quite specific in our approach.

Obviously if someone contacts us directly, that takes precedence over everything. Third-party sites, it's the ones that we work with already because we're almost reliant on the alert coming to us to say feedback has been left and then we'll react to that. Because we're just not a big enough or developed enough business to have somebody just sat there finding reviews to respond to.

       So it is a reactive thing.

I: And in which review sites do you give this reply?

A: So I reply to the TripAdvisor ones. We reply to the Facebook ones on the whole. That's another one we tend to be quite active with, because from a social media side of things, it's Facebook that is by far and away the best entanglement with our customers, the best connection and the most feedback and reaction we get, from all social media sites is Facebook. So we tend to focus on that above the others, and I don't think there's any other social media sites that do customer lead feedback, because we've got business pages on Facebook. So it's created around that kind of purpose.

To be honest, the Booking.com and LateRoom and there's a couple of others. Egencia, Expedia. We don't tend to respond to them because actually it's only as easy as the review sites make it to respond. So Facebook, we're always logged into. TripAdvisor is always a URL on my desktop that I click on and it puts me in there. But the other sites, like Booking.com, LateRoom, those kind of sites, because they are external booking sites that have quite heavily layered security, and we connect to them from a bookings and availability planner point of view through our specific property management system software.

So we have a software system by a company called GuestLine, called Reslinks and that basically has a connection both to the third party websites and the global distribution system and that basically, we control our diary through one piece of software that is interconnected to all of the other channels.

Because we don't log into the individual portals every day or every other day to update our availability or our block out date because it's all done through that central piece of software, we don't tend to go in it and the passwords needs changing every 30 days. I suppose it's because we're not a big organisation that can afford or justify having one person to do it.

It's part of all of our day jobs to do the bits of feedback as and when they crop up. So I suppose it depends on how easy and how much part of our working day it is to log into these sites and respond. And actually, I think, I might be wrong, but I think it's only recently, in the last year or two years that a lot of the third party sites have opened up the opportunity to respond. So for them, for a long time as far as I remember it, you got your review and you didn't get the chance to answer.

Which I think is probably more of a frustration for hoteliers, that you don't have your opportunity to respond. So then I suppose a by-product of that, it's a bit rubbish, because people like me probably moan at their account managers that you can't respond and then they give you the opportunity to respond and you go, it's a bit hard work. I'm not going to bother.

I suppose we respond to the ones that we perceive to be the key channels. In truth, the ones that we think customers are going to look at.

I: Which is TripAdvisor and Facebook?

A: TripAdvisor and Facebook, yeah, and I've fallen out with TripAdvisor a little bit in the last year or so. As we've touched on, TripAdvisor used to be the consumer champion and they were created just to give guests a voice. They've obviously capitalised on that and they try and play both sides of the market. So they've got their own booking channel or you can have your own premium listing with them and enhanced listing and offers and banners and all this kind of stuff, for which they want to charge you money, of course.

Because they're a commercial enterprise. So to me that's almost the wrong end of cynical because they've built off the back of the customers, but yet they want to raise their revenue from the hoteliers. We listed with them. We had a premium listing with them over a couple of years and we didn't really see much value from it. When we stopped having our listing with

them, we found that our league table position dropped. So that must have been part of their algorithm that they gave preferred partners a slightly higher status.

I: So there is something like that, like you mentioned earlier. Premium listing?

A: Yeah, that's right.

I: So what does it do?

A: It gives you things like, if you have just a basic profile on TripAdvisor, it won't show your telephone number. It won't show your website. It doesn't allow customers to book directly through the TripAdvisor page to your website. So it basically gives the basic information and you might have the opportunity to upload images and you can respond to feedback and stuff like that.

But when you pay them, it gives you a kind of a more, a richer profile. So you can add more information. You can put direct links to your website, email addresses, telephone numbers. So they very much say if you pay us to list on a paid for basis, we'll enhance your position with TripAdvisor, which will get you in front of more customers and give you more opportunity to take bookings, which to me, isn't what TripAdvisor set out to be.

Funnily enough, I was having a conversation with a marketing company that we work alongside and one of the guys that works for them, his uncle or a relative runs a restaurant and so we'll often talk about the industry and TripAdvisor and stuff like that. We were joking and saying that actually, what should happen is TripAdvisor will now undoubtedly will be built to a position in terms of their revenue, which I'm guessing comes predominantly from hoteliers and from businesses who are paying for their listing.

So really, if everyone decided to stop paying them overnight, they'd just disappear. So I'm going to start a campaign to bring TripAdvisor to its knees. No, I'm not. So yeah, TripAdvisor, I feel… and maybe nothing that they've done purposefully or directly, but to me it feels like that's where people go to if they want to moan, if they want to put something negative on there.

Because I think as well, if you go… this is just me personally speaking, but I go out and have a nice dinner, or a nice day somewhere, or even go into a shop and I'm treated well. I take that away with me and that makes me feel quite nice and I just get on with my life. I don't feel compelled to go and write a review about it. But I suppose, if you go somewhere and you feel you're treated badly or you feel you're ripped off, or you feel you had a bad experience, you want to get your own back and punish that person or that business or that

organisation. And that's where feedback is a great way of doing that, isn't it? You can hurt them.

Actually, I've gone out and I've had terrible experiences of places but I've not gone online because I've made a complaint and I've stuck with my guns until I felt that my complaint's been acknowledged and dealt with and sorted, and then that also draws it to a close for me. So I wouldn't want to then go and give them an even harder time. If they told me to do one and they weren't going to deal with that complaint, then I maybe would take it to that point.

But yeah, I suppose it's the human condition, isn't it? It's how people decide that they want to react to the situation that they're put into.

I: Well, from my conversation with the reviewer, most of them write because they want to say thank you. Firstly I thought that they want to have revenge, like you said, but the biggest motive they had when they write it is to say thank you and inform others. But yeah, some of them also have the motive, but for the potential tourist who never write anything, exactly the same like you, when they have something good, they don't want to share anything, but if they have something negative, they want to say something but apparently they don't do that. But they always read reviews whenever they want to make a decision. It's very important for them to read this first, in order to make sure that they make a good decision, I guess.

A: An informed choice.

I: Yeah, informed choice because they never go there and they don't know anyone who's gone there. It's important.

A: Yeah, and it is, it is part of the industry now. And lots of other industries as well. If you used to want to hire a builder, you used to look in the Yellow Pages if you didn't know one and hire a builder and take a chance. Whereas now, you've got lots of review sites and places you can go to where people can tell you whether or not they've done a good job or turned up or charged them appropriately. So it is, it's part of a wider step change towards consumer choice, I suppose, and if it has the right impact and it makes people do a better job and be more accountable and look to provide better service, then it can't be a bad thing. Hopefully.

I: Yes. So can you tell me a little bit more about your approach in managing feedback? I notice that you stop giving response from October 2016.

A: Has it been that long already?

I: Yeah.

A: Do you know, that ties in perfectly with when we started actual physical building of the function room, so at that point, I suppose I've purely been in project mode for what feels like ten years. Apparently it's only one. So yeah, that would tie in about right.

My approach on the feedback itself, I've always tried to be moderate. I've always tried to be fair and quite neutral on it and I think over time when responding to feedback, and again, things like TripAdvisor leaving you feeling a little bit cold, because I can put my response on there but then you don't hear anything back. That's probably a good thing, because on something like Facebook, you could end up having a back and forth conversation for a year, on agreeing or disagreeing, if that was your disposition.

I: But do you still respond in Facebook?

A: Well, it tends to be the team that deal with the Facebook responses, so I've held TripAdvisor back for me as my little area of responsibility but the rest of the team tend to deal with the… I suppose it's the difference between the social media and a review website. I think the two sit slightly differently and because the team have the direct access, manging social media, so it's them that are putting the updates on, it's them that put the offers on. It's them that put the pictures of the peacock or the pictures of the food going out, that's not me.

It tends to be them that picks those kinds of things up but whereas TripAdvisor is the pure feedback portal, other than the other little bits and bobs it does. That's what it's there for. So yeah, in fairness, I don't always check whether they've kept up with the feedback or not. But can't really give anyone a hard time for it, can I, when I've not been doing TripAdvisor ones for a year. I'm not really leading by example, am I?

You're going to see a glut of responses come online now, Heppy, after this conversation.

I: Oh, really? Are you going to?

A: I feel guilty now. I've been ignoring my duties. My approach was always… when I had a proper job in my careers before working in hospitality, I worked for large communications companies, financial services companies in sales and retention. So I used to run sales teams and sales departments and respective areas, where that kind of customer interaction was key, which is probably why I still value it so highly now, because that's how I did spend a lot of my time before running my own business, when I worked for other people. That's what I tended to do quite a bit of.

In a past life, I apologise in advance for the recording, but we were told about a style of communication to do with managing feedback and complaints and sorry to swear, but it was called a shit sandwich. So used to put the good, the shit and then the good and that used to be a widely quite well known way of diffusing a complaint and also making someone feel it had come to a resolution.

That is broadly the format of which I would typically respond to. I suppose if it was a complaint. If someone wrote a review saying we had a lovely time, thank you very much, it would always be brilliant, we're so glad, we're so pleased. We really enjoyed hosting your event. We really enjoyed you staying with us. The guys all had a lovely time as well. We hope to see you again soon, thank you very much. Wish you all the best for the future.

If it was a negative piece of feedback it would tend to be a case of an apology, whether I agree with them or not, they're telling me they're upset, so I think apologising costs me nothing but hopefully puts across to the customer the fact that actually you're not being belligerent, you're not being reactive in the way that some people would be and put the CAPS lock on and start ranting back at them.

So I would always apologise, acknowledge that they felt that they maybe didn't have the great time that they thought they were going to have. The middle bit, if I felt it necessary, if I felt the things they were saying were wrong or unfair or if someone left me a review saying, I stayed in this bedroom and the carpet was filthy, then the middle bit would be, where I went back and said, actually I've been in that room and I've had a look at the carpet and it's not filthy.

Then I'd finish it by saying, again, really sorry you didn't have a nice time, really welcome the opportunity if you are back in the area in future to come and stay with us again, come and see us, we'll look after you and hopefully give you the opportunity to see that we're not somewhere you don't want to stay again.

So that's broadly the attitude I would take.

I: Okay. So for the middle bit, will you investigate it yourself or how do you deal with this?

A: Absolutely. Depending on what it is. Because normally people complain about one of three things. It's either the product, the service or the environment. This is a good example of one that I responded to years ago.

Sunday's in our industry are always horrific, especially Sunday night. They're so quiet. On this Sunday night, and this was over at "X" House, probably about five or six years ago. We had about four bedrooms occupied on Sunday night and we had two people come down and eat in the restaurant, two couples. They both ate with us that night, neither of them said a word to lead us to believe there was an issue. The next morning or 48 hours later, by the time it dropped, we had two reviews on the same day.

One of the reviews was we went to this lovely intimate restaurant, it was so nice and quiet. My wife and I were able to talk to each other, we had nice wine, we had a nice meal. It was so relaxing, it was lovely, then we went up to bed. We had a nice night's sleep, left in the morning. It was lovely.

Then the other review we had was, we walked into a cold, uninteresting restaurant, there was only one other set of people in there. It was so quiet, it was dead. We couldn't enjoy the food because we felt that people were listening to our conversations. You've got to take a judgement on that.

Say for instance, a piece of feedback says, we had chicken and it was raw. Yeah, I can walk into the kitchen and go, what's going on here. Did they return the chicken? Did you see the chicken? Did you then send out another meal to replace it? Did you apologise? Did you go out and see the customer, chef, and make sure that they knew this was a one off situation, doesn't normally happen?

Because we give the guys the ability to deal with issues there and in the moment. So yeah, I suppose it depends what it is. We had someone complaining to us the other day that there was condensation on the inside of the windows when they woke up that morning. I don't need to investigate that because I know there is condensation on the inside of the windows because it's a 400 year old house with single glazed windows that we can't really do anything about.

Condensation isn't evil. It's moisture that builds up because the inside's warm and the outside's cold. Surely you'd rather have that. Of course, we don't say this to people, but you take a view on it. You take a view, but when it needs investigating, absolutely.

Typically what I would do is, and I think the important thing is, even though I've not necessarily been responding to this feedback over the last 12 months, I still look at it and we still put the fixes in place for things we need to fix off the back of it. It's just the time. It's actually quite laborious to sit down in front of your computer, shut the rest of the world off and formulate these responses in a meaningful way.

I: Especially because you want to have this not standard response?

A: Absolutely, yeah. I could cut and paste, the reception guys could do that for us, but then I suppose what would be interesting to know, as well, Heppy, is what does good look like from a feedback point of view? If the people that you speak to say actually, the content of the response doesn't matter to me massively. I just like to know that someone's read it and responds back straight away. So actually maybe I am doing it the wrong way.

I: Well, not really, you're doing right.

A: Okay.

I: Because most of them, when they talk about this reply from the hotel, and they saw the standard one they think that the hotel is not care enough, because they acknowledge the problem. They know that there is a problem, but then they don't do anything about it.

A: Sure.

I: That's why they have this standard reply, right. If they do something then they would have written it on the reply, so that's the kind of thing that they talk to me. And also they said that even though they don't consider a reply as much as the review itself, but it's important for them to have this two sides of the story.

A: Yeah, absolutely.

I: So, yeah. Especially for the negative one. So I think for negative one, you need to respond as fast as possible.

A: I'll clear an afternoon. And you're right. I suppose the truth of the matter is, that as much as I know they're sat there waiting to be done and I would like to have the final answer and the final solution in place, you're absolutely right, just feeling listened to and acknowledged is probably…

I: Because the potential tourist wants to know that they're going to go to somewhere that is caring, and they will be taken care of properly. So you don't have to respond to all of this one year off. You just need to maybe in the last couple of months, because a lot of people that I interviewed, they also don't want to read all of the reviews.

A: So they don't go all the way back. That's interesting.

I: So they will only read one or two page and that's it. So yeah.

A: That's interesting, yeah. Okay, so everything is looked into and is researched. So typically if something comes back negatively, I'll send an email to the person, or I'll speak to the person who is best placed to give me an answer. So if it's to do with food, it will be chef. If it's to do with customer experience, it will be front of house manager. Or if it's to do with lots of different elements, it will be probably be Noel, who is the group general manager. So I'd speak to him and say, just find out if that did really happen. Or if it did, why and what did we do at the time about it?

I: So will you, for all these negative ones, will you get to know who write this? Do you know the identity of this person?

A: No, to be honest. Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't, and I think it depends on the nature of the complaint. For instance, if someone says I attended a wedding and the drinks were too expensive, then I don't really need to know who you are. I don't really need to know where you were in the day or anything other than, I'm really sorry you thought the drinks were too expensive, blame the tax man.

Obviously if a guest has stayed in a bedroom and it's a dirty carpet example again. A guest has stayed in a bedroom, carpet was dirty, then we've through a process of elimination, we've got to work out who they are, because we've got to know which carpet to go and look at. Again, with TripAdvisor, it's a challenge because everyone has peculiar nicknames and acronyms and goodness knows what else as their identities and don't always sign their names at the bottom of the feedback, so it can be a little bit of a, right, did anybody moan about the carpet? No, right. Did anybody stay with their husband who was six feet two and his feet were hanging out the bottom of the bed? No, right, okay. So then we go and look at all the carpets. So there is some work we can do.

This the thing that frustrates a little bit as well, from customers side of things. Someone, normally when they email us directly, with a complaint or with an issue that they had, and again it could be related to the bedroom carpet is a good example. I'll then respond to them and say, I'm really sorry to hear this, can you tell me which room you stayed in? Then I know what to look at and then they won't respond. I'm then a little bit hesitant to invest further in that complaint because I'm almost, if you're taking the time to put this feedback to us and I've responded back and saying I'm interested in what you're saying, just give me this one little quite salient piece of information to help me bring it to a conclusion and they don't, then I'm less likely to go parading round all the windows to see which one had condensation on the inside of it. It is that to and from through certain mediums is relevant, I think. It's an investment in time from us as well. I will get round to responding to people on TripAdvisor.

I: Lots of people will look at TripAdvisor before they book the hotel, because I think it's…

A: I think it's because it's there. For us even, when we go on holiday as a family, we holiday as a family, we've got a ten-year-old daughter. So we want somewhere that's going to fit for her and fit for us. But you'll look at even the most wonderful of places, anywhere in the world and someone will have had a bad time and you're like, will we have a bad time.

It's almost, the internet is great at giving you some information, but not necessarily all the information or all the information that you want from it. So for us, we stopped looking at TripAdvisor. Do you know what, we're going to go somewhere we know or somewhere we'll ring them up and ask them the questions, we'll speak to the people. We'll get a feel for the kind of environment that we're going to. Or we just go to Centerparcs up the road, it's dead easy and we love it.

I: Most of the tourists that I've interviewed, they say that even though they saw these negative reviews, they won't just accept it as it is. They will just also consider it and say, put it in their own perception. If the review was about something in the room which is not really matter for them, they will just ignore it, even though it's negative, because most people come to the hotel just to sleep and not to enjoy.

A: Yes.

I: That kind of thing.

A: Interesting.

I: People don't just take the negative ones as it is. They will also learn about other information that they can have.

A: Yes, so that they get an overall picture in their minds. Okay.

I: Okay. So about reviews and about the consumers, about the review itself. Do you think the review on these review sites or on social media is genuine? Because there's also some problems about these fakes ones, right?

A: In honesty, I don't think I've yet come across a fake review.

I: Okay, that's good.

A: That hasn't been a genuine mistake, and I'll explain that and it's not relating to "Y". I think broadly here we've never had reason. I don't think we've ever had a disgruntled ex-employee or somebody, a competitor who's tried to damage our reputation. But at "X", so we've got us on one side of the road and then we've got "X" Hall on the other side of the road, which used to be the council offices for Newark and Sherwood District Council. But also did hospitality and events and catering. So occasionally we'd get a terrible review for offering horrific camping facilities.

Then I can say, I'm really sorry, we don't offer camping, so this isn't for us. In that sense, TripAdvisor are quite good, because there's a mechanism for us to put this review in query, if you like and say, quite clearly this isn't meant for us, it's meant for them. We don't offer camping or caravanning or anything like that, so please remove it from our site. And actually they do. Facebook are less good at things like that. So Facebook, we have had some reviews that have been incorrectly inputted for us and then you'll fill out an online form telling Facebook of that, but you never ever get anything changed there. They are utterly faceless and non-human in their approach to things. Actually to give TripAdvisor a little bit of credit, they still offer that as quite a diligent service. Fortunately as far as I'm aware, as far as I can recollect, nothing.

I: Nothing like that.

A: We have people make things up, but that's because, sometimes what we find with feedback is if you walk into a room and you take an immediate dislike to it for whatever reason. You could walk into a room and maybe a bulb's blown, for argument's sake. You go to switch a lamp on, the bulb doesn't work and then you go, that bulb doesn't work, what else doesn't work. What else is wrong? It's like pulling on a thread.

I: They'll concentrate on the negative.

A: They start to pull the bed out or start to look under the bed, and they start to move the furniture and pull the cushions out from the sofas and you could probably walk into any room at any time and find two three things that maybe aren't perfect. But if you walk in that room and you switch that light on and it comes on, then you relax and you just go and sit down. I think quite often, first impressions are quite important to us. So what we tend to do is walk guests into their room, let them in their room, get them settled down. Is there anything you need, is everything okay? Then hopefully that customer journey starts in the right way that means that they're not ripping the room apart or seeing if there's any muck in the plughole or anything like that.

I: So always like that?

A: We try to.

I: Every guest will be attended?

A: Yes, the only time we don't do that is if we've got a large function or large wedding and event, where maybe the entire bridal party shows up at the same time, so all 11 rooms. We've got 11 cars pull in the driveway and at that point, we just go here are your keys, there's the rooms, because everyone just wants to get in and crack on. If we can, that's the service level that we aspire to is that very personal service. We've only got 12 bedrooms at "X", 11 bedrooms here. We like to offer that slightly different service than if you were going into a city centre hotel with 300 bedrooms, where they go, in a nice way, there's the life, 3rd floor on your left, thank you very much. That's what we try.

I: Okay. So about the information that you get off these review sites or social media, what happened to t   hem? What do you do with this information?

A: It falls into categories. Good, bad and the ugly. If we get good feedback on TripAdvisor, and you'll see this from responses when I've put them on in the past, we'll always say to people, thanks for the feedback, we'll make sure the tea get to see it. So if someone says the food was lovely, of if someone says, Fran who ran the wedding for us was lovely and did everything for us, then we'll always make sure that that individual gets to see that feedback. We don't expect the staff to spend their time off work trawling through TripAdvisor to see if someone's said something nice about them. So we've got a board on the wall in the back of house areas where we tend to put the positive feedback and see it as they're walking past.

We'll email it to, if someone says something nice about the reception guys or the food and beverage staff, we'll always make sure that gets put forward to them so they can all see it. We have monthly management meetings, so if there's any issues that have been brought up, we can address those and say, okay. We've had three people tell us that they really hate the Caesar salad, chef, please change the recipe. So we do try and react to the feedback because, another boss of mine, in another job of mine, said feedback is a gift and you can choose whether to accept it or not. So we could just close our ears to it and ignore it all or you can pick and choose. I think that's the key thing, is picking and choosing the actions that you think are both relevant and important to action, and that will lead to improved guest experience as a result of actioning them.

So again, got a lumpy bed in room five and eight people have told us they're not able to sleep, let's get a new mattress. But if one person says it's the hardest mattress they've ever slept in but we've sold that room 500 times in the last three years and we've never had another issue with it, you say, okay, that didn't suit them. We don't need to do anything. So there are mechanisms in place where we manage it. If it's something like the lightbulb didn't work on the lamp when I walked into the bedroom, we've got a maintenance guy and we've got a board in the office that has all the maintenance jobs that crop up through any given day, so typically that's the easiest fix. It's reported, recorded, fixed. And then signed off. Then job done.

I: Okay, so it informs your decisions, your strategy too, then?

A: Yes, yeah absolutely. It's all taken on board and then it's filtered out to what we feel needs actioning and then what we then feel is either purely sentimental and maybe just that one in a million or one in a hundred different view to how other guests perceive it. At that point, you make your decision accordingly. There's also, the important thing is, the financial consideration as well. If someone stays with us and they say, I don't know what a good example would be. So someone stays with us in a bedroom and says the water pressure wasn't as strong as I would have like. The water pressure was a little bit weak. We'll look at that. It's an older system maybe compare with modern standards.

You do get better showers and stronger showers, but that's going to cost us £3000 because we need to rip the whole thing out and start again. Then you'll go, okay, that's going to cost £3000. I've got all these other things I need to do. Let's build that into the next time we have a boiler servicing or the next time a plumber is here doing something else, let's ask him to have a look at it. We can maybe make it a little bit better or the plumber might say, no that's as good as it's going to become. Then you build that into your long-term maintenance plan. A good example is, when we took "Y" House over, it had very poor water supply and hot water system, because the water main that we're connected to isn't particularly good. the water pressure isn't brilliant because we're out in the middle of nowhere.

So what we did is, how long did it take us to get it into place? Probably took us 18 months to get it into place. They had a solution in place, because what they did is they had pumps situated around the hotel. When someone wanted a shower, they'd switch the shower and then that pump would kick in, which would divert 70 percent of the water to that one shower. Which gave a decent shower, but then if five or six people did that, everyone's getting a trickle. It wasn't quite that bad. So when we came in and we evaluated the business and looked what we needed to do, we very quickly identified this as a common bug bear. We

were getting lots of feedback about it. None of it particularly great. So in our refurbishment scheme, we built in a plan and a scheme to have a large amount of water storage, in the property. So that water, rather than being dependent on coming in from the mains, we've got a sealed tank or a couple of sealed tanks, that store the cold water. We replaced the boilers. We added two large hot water cylinders and now, if 11 people want a shower, they'll get a shower. It will lose a little bit of pressure, but all in all, we fixed that problem.

It was a big problem to fix and an expensive problem to fix, but it removed any complaints of poor water pressure, poor supply, supply running out altogether as it occasionally did, when the small tanks that were feeding off the mains got filled up, because they didn't have the capacity to cope with the volume that was needed, especially Monday to Thursday, when you've got the business travellers. They're all up at roughly a similar time, they want their breakfast at a similar time. They want to be out the door to be on with the rest of their journey. So again, depending on the feedback and depending on the validity of it and the importance of it, and the budget of it and feasibility. How quickly could we put this solution in place. All of those things get put into our future planning of how we can develop the business and improve the business.

I: Alright. Now, I'd like to focus on what the hotel does to manage the review as part of marketing strategy on your customer service quality.

A: Okay.

I: So could you elaborate more about the decision that, I know we touched this point before, about the decision that you stopped for almost a year now, but before you always give response to almost every review. So what made you come to that decision?

A: What made me come to the decision to respond?

I: To respond before and then stop now?

A: To be honest, workload, if I'm honest. That was the reason that it changed, was purely down to the fact that… again as a small business, we had an enormous scheme that we wanted to get into effect whilst still doing the day job and certain things had to give and doing the feedback was one of the things that naturally went, because that was… it was one of the jobs that I would always do when I had a quiet half an hour or a quiet 50 minutes, an hour, again, it's a quite time consuming thing. As soon as the project kicked off, I had no time. So that got banked, because the bills still need to be paid, the wages still need to be paid. I suppose what I had to do is separate what had to be done for the operation to

continue, and what could be parked. I suppose maybe the decision should have been slightly different. What should have been decided is actually the GM would then do the TripAdvisor responses but in a perverse way, I'm quite precious of retaining that. Because kind of going back to what I said, before, for that continuity and I'm not the kind of person that would say respond to all of them but put my name at the bottom of it.

I: That's not you.

A: No. Maybe it should be. I'm not saying I've got all the answers and everything is right, but I suppose, in terms of marketing, there is a marketing slant to it, because it's the tone of voice that I think comes across as well. So if one of the other team members wrote a response, I would be able to tell the difference, whether it was the business owner or team member of the business. Because I think as the business owner, it is, it's your livelihood. It's everything that we have as an asset is tied up in our businesses and that's our pension. That's what will put my daughter through school and send us on holidays. We don't earn a wage, we work on profit and loss, so if we don't make any money, we don't earn anything. So from a marketing point of view, and this is… I have friends that are far better marketers than me, but it's about maintaining that connection with the customer that feeds into the identity of your business, which I think hopefully people resonate with.

I: What about the decisions before, that you always reply to all of these review? What is the motivation of that?

A: Two-fold, I think. First and foremost, it was for customer satisfaction. So that we were responding or acknowledging and dealing with the good and the bad. But then secondly, it is marketing lead. It is about the customers of tomorrow. It's about making us, even in a, not conflict, but even in a difficult situation of having to acknowledge shortfalls or having to deal with problems, it's almost… you're almost writing it 50 percent for the reviewer, 50 percent for anyone else reading it. That's the truth of it. You do want to appear, I suppose the appearance of confidence that we will fix that. That won't happen again, which in brackets means, Mr Customer, if you're considering coming to us this isn't going to happen to you. The peacock's not going to keep you away, the bulb is going to work. So it is. It is two-fold. It's both dealing with the current issue but as well, offering the solution for future customers to not have to worry about.

I: Okay, well, maybe more for the future customer because many of the reviewers…

A: No, because that reviewer is still a future customer as well.

I: Oh, right, yes.

A: So we've had a situation. We had a guest here who they owned some hospitality business over Derbyshire way and they used to come to "Y" before we took the place over, and I know this because I've been in communication with them since. They said that they stuck with "Y" and in the last three or four years before we bought it, the old owners kind of had given up a little bit. They wanted to retire, they wanted to sell it and they'd suffered a succession of knock backs with staff and personal stuff and they lost their appetite for the business.

These customers who had come year in and year out, the last time they came, was the year we took over and they literally arrived two weeks after we'd brought the property, so we were still very much finding out feet and emptying the cupboards and recruiting staff, because there was very few staff. This guy called the hotel after he'd stayed and he said, this is the worst time he'd had. You didn't have our favourite wine, there wasn't… what was the other thing? Didn't have the wine. Forgive me, it was three years ago now.

It wasn't the furniture outside the room that they used to like. So they had one of the outside rooms that's got a little patio to it. Didn't have the furniture. Not going to come back. So that customer was a customer that we dealt with a complaint at the time, and then six months later when we'd got ourselves a little bit more on solid ground, we then invited them back at no charge, with a bottle of that wine in their bedroom and the furniture out on the patio and they're our customer again.

It's about dealing with, acknowledging and trying to resolve the complaint, not just to get if off your desk, but with the faith that hopefully you can do enough that that person will still consider coming back to you again in the future. That to me is a successful resolution complaint. In the same way, if you buy something from John Lewis and it breaks, you take it back to John Lewis and if they fix it, you'll probably go and shop at John Lewis again.

They won't just give your money back and throw you out the door and expect they'll never see you again. So yeah, it is. 50/50.

I: Okay then. Timing issues, were you back then, give yourself a deadline to give a reply or…?

A: It wasn't if you like, a KPI that I gave myself that I had to deal with it in X amount of time. At that time, it wasn't. But I would definitely have responded within a week of the review being left, I'd have guessed. Ideally, I suppose again, that's where the inertia of a

situation takes and it would have been based on what else was going on at the time. And also probably whether alarm bells went off when I read the review. If it was a review, saying we had a lovely time, we'll definitely be back, thank you very much everyone. Then that review, I'd go, oh, that's really nice, I'll get around to responding to that when I next have a minute. If it's a review that said, we stayed last night, and one of the housekeeping staff came in and stole our purse and someone slit our tyres and very much a wow, this needs to be managed. Then I'd probably drop whatever else I was doing and get straight onto the portal and put a response out there.

Timeliness was important, because it was one of those things that I did. I always held quite high on my list of priorities to manage it. I think as well, going back to before we had this place, very much in the early days of "X", we were in a position where we had to fight for every customer because we were almost building a business from nothing and when we took that business over, it had been run terribly beforehand. A good example, where we were just outside "X", which is just outside Newark and there's a large power station in a village called Staythorpe, huge turbine power station. They had loads of people constantly coming and going, who were contractors, people from outside the area, travelling internationally, coming to survey the expansion of this power station. They had such a bad relationship with the hotel, that they used to drive past the hotel and go and stay in accommodation 15 miles away, because they didn't want to stay there because they'd fallen out with the previous owner. So we were very much in a position where we had to very quickly and very strongly show that we were very different to previous operators. Now the good thing that TripAdvisor allows you to do, if you buy a business, and you can show them your proof of purchase of the business, they'll scrub all the previous reports.

I: Oh, that's why I only… I can only read the one that you've been answering to.

A: Yep. So that was one of the first things we did when we took over "Y", because the reviews before were scathing, so as soon as we took over "Y", that was one of the first things I did, contact TripAdvisor and say we've taken over. You need to prove it. You need to send them an official contract paperwork albeit redacted, and then they will remove all previous feedback. Someone like Facebook won't. Again, they're the little kind of funny differences between the different organisations.

I: But can you just make a new Facebook account?

A: Yes, you can, but the difficulty is then that you lose your audience. So with "Y"'s, when we took it on, it had something like 1000 followers. Some of those probably in use,

some of them probably not in use. Some of them liked the business, some of them probably didn't like the business, but we didn't want to lose that potential audience by starting again. What we focussed on was that we just spoke a lot about new owners, new business, this is the new plans that we've got, to very much draw a line in the sand and start a new chapter in the story.

I: Alright. Now, I'd like to focus about the tourists and how do you feel about them? So about the guests that has write these reviews, what do you think about them? What do you feel when they had this review?

A: What kind of review is it?

I: Any review.

A: To me, do I feel anything? I don't know really. I've not thought about it like that. I suppose it does depend on the review. It does matter. So it's like any situation, if someone says nice things to you or does nice things for you, you feel warm, you like them. You enjoy their company. If someone comes in and treats you badly, or you feel treated badly by them, that's going to evoke a different emotion from you. I look at our customers, I think very similarly as in we're part of their day. We're part of their journey, whether it's a holiday, whether it's a work trip, whatever it is. The responsibility is on us to look after them and make them happy. After all, we're in the hospitality industry, the clue is in the name. We're here to be hospitable and look after them and treat them well, and when they're walking out the door, after they've concluded their visit with us, they should be happy and shiny and focussed on what they're doing next.

We don't want to be the centre of anybody's world. That's not what we aspire to do. So how I feel about the reviewers? I suppose I feel that they are people who I'm grateful use our business. I'm grateful take a decision to come to us rather than anywhere else.

The responsibility then fall to us to look after them and to do a good job of servicing their needs and being able to wave goodbye to them and hopefully see them again. But if we never see them again, so be it. We're part of that journey. Yeah, I can't say that if someone's left us a really terrible review, I'm not going to go and get their telephone number from our booking system and harass them and order piles of horse manure to be delivered to their driveways and ring their employer and tell them they're drug addicts or anything.

There's nothing beyond that singular interaction, whether it's resolved or not, leaves us feeling any different to the next customer we see. Does that answer your question? I never thought about before.

I:	When you reply, have you ever find out, or tried to find out if the reviewers has read your reply or not?

A:	I've thought about it. I must admit, I have thought about it, because I don't know if TripAdvisor sends the reviewer a notification or an alert to tell them that a response had been posted. Do you know?

I:	Well, most of the reviewers that I interviewed never received a reply, so I can't answer that.

A:	Really? That's interesting.

I:	But they will get notification from TripAdvisor or Booking.com if something comes up.

A:	So if an operator responds, it will ping them a notification to tell them of that.

I:	I don't know exactly because the reviewers that I've interviewed never had the response, so they posted a review, but never had…

A:	That's interesting, because I think, because we've got a TripAdvisor account, I've left two or three reviews in the eight years that I've had an account. One of them was Harts in Nottingham. Went for a lovely Sunday lunch. My mum took me and my sister out for a lovely Sunday lunch and our families for our birthdays a couple of years ago and it was the first time I'd been there. We had a really nice time, the food was delicious, great location, could park outside, all the rest of it. I thought, I am going to give them some nice feedback and part of me thought, hopefully I'll get a response, which will answer my question of do reviewers get a notification, because I have thought about it in the past. I've never thought about ringing TripAdvisor because they're not easy people to talk to over the phone.

Then sod's law, they never responded to me anyway, because I went back about three weeks later and wondered if anyone had responded and they hadn't. I have thought about it but I've no idea. Obviously as we talked about, with TripAdvisor, they don't then have an opportunity to respond. I don't know. But what I can tell you is that, I didn't do it very often and I don't do it very often, but when I've really disagreed with a piece of feedback and I've written that I disagree and I don't support anything of what they've said, and that's kind of it. They've never then contacted us again off the back of it. So no reviewer has then been

frustrated enough that I've not agreed with their complaint, that they've then rang or emailed or found another way of communicating with us. So it does seem to be, certainly in the case of negative feedback, people vent their frustration and then they feel better about it. Then maybe they move on, I don't know. Maybe they don't expect a response and it doesn't sound like many people get them. That's interesting.

I: In any other sites or channels, can you…?

A: Yeah, Facebook we get a response.

I: You said yourself it becomes like conversation then.

A: Yeah, you almost need to, depending on how it's going, you almost need to close it down. We had a lady complaining that we didn't sell enough types of flavoured ciders. The kind of Bulmer's and these kinds of things. So we went back and said, really sorry that you didn't feel we sold enough ciders. Actually, our bars are stocked and she wrote it quite aggressively and it did get a little bit responded in kind.

Actually we've got 64 different types of drinks, including 12 wines, 8 gins and blah, blah, blah and listed it all out. Then her response was, well, I'm just telling you what I saw and I think… it all got a little bit school ground, and then one of her friends joined in as well, and this is the danger of Facebook is, it is very much, in certain ways, a race to the bottom of who can get most insulting very quickly.

Then one of her friends joined in and said and the disco was late and I didn't like the food. You end up in almost like a slanging match. At that point we just closed it down. Thank you for your feedback, we take it on board, thank you very much. That's it. Done.

Then with nice feedback, positive feedback, we get good feedback on the weddings and events that we do and it's sometimes quite nice to have that interaction. Because they'll give you a nice review. You'll say thank you very much. Sorry, I'll just have a look at this. If I get more than one phone call from my wife, that's a good idea to…

I: You can take the call.

A: … pick the phone up. Let me just listen to the voicemail if that's okay. Then we might ask them to send us some photos of the day or in the past we've actually said to them as well, would you mind leaving us a review on TripAdvisor or something like that, so other people can see. So again, I think it depends on the nature of the correspondence that we try and control or note. [Listening to voicemail] It's fine. Is it urgent?

So sometimes the interaction can be quite good and quite positive, but again, I think it's knowing when to embrace it, and when to maybe… it's when it becomes unproductive. We don't want to get into a slanging match with people. We don't want to have arguments. If it's a piece of feedback, we want to take it on board. We want to deal with it and we want to respond accordingly, but then that's not opening a floodgate of lots of backwards and forwards. Again, that's because a phone call is a great way of dealing with it. With a phone call you have got that flowing two-way conversation. With emails or social media or that kind of thing, it almost never draws to a close, because you post your response, you get their response three days later because it just so happens they haven't been on Facebook for three days. It's where does it end?

I: Yes. Okay, finally I want to learn a little bit about your company's marketing strategy for consumer satisfaction and service quality management. So can you please tell me a little bit about that?

A: Okay. Because of our size and the relative, compared to larger organisations, relatively low footfall of our business, I think our marketing strategy is we very much depend on providing a good product, a good service and a good experience, and word of mouth being hopefully our main advocate, because we don't have hundreds of thousands of customers that we want to tap into. We've got a strategy where we will advertise our products, but we're reliant on word of mouth to advertise our service. Does that make sense?

I: You mean, from the people who's been before?

A: Yes, so who's used us already. So for instance, the responsibility starts with us to ensure we provide a good service and have people leaving happy, because that then to us is the best advertising in terms of growing our reputation. We don't have huge budgets or huge expenditure or even infrastructure or even staff for things like guest questionnaires and sending an email three months after you stay or six months after you stay, that kind of thing. We put the onus on ourselves to do a good job at that moment in time, let that customer go back out into the world and do whatever they're going to do in the hope that when the need is next there for them to use a hotel in the area, they come back to us because of the experience that they've had.

I: So you don't email them directly after they stay?

A: Yeah, so we have one email directly after their stay. I think I mentioned earlier, where we offer them a bit of a discount or a glass of wine when they come back. We are looking

at… got the first conversation actually in the New Year, at building a stronger format of e-broadcasting, so building up email contacts and sending them a monthly newsletter or something like that. Social media, I suppose, is another big one that we rely on for keeping people engaged with our brand and engaged with what we do. And certainly from a wedding and events point of view, we get a lot of interest from prospective bridal parties who follow us on Facebook, and they'll see the pictures that we're sharing, they'll see the feedback that we'll getting from people. That will hopefully develop to a customer of tomorrow, coming through and using us.

I: Your strategy for the service quality management itself. Do you have some kind of…?

A: We always look at what we do from a standards and consistency point of view. We do have robust processes in place for everything, really, even how we answer the phone. When someone makes a booking with us, they will receive an email to confirm that booking. They'll receive an email on that confirmation has their name, when they're coming, the price that they're paying. We've got a footer to all of those emails that has local information, places to go, places to visit. So it captures if it's a tourist stay. From service quality management, I think it's more self-managed in recruiting the right people and having the people in place that know what's expected of them from us as a business and how much focus we put on that customer delight. It's not a formulated plan that I can show you on paper, but is very much about personalised approach, making sure that we deal with any query that we get, in a timely, professional and successful manner and gauging from that customer what their feedback is.

So one of the things that we have got is a feedback form that the reception guys fill out. So if a guest checks out, when a guest checks out, if they give us good or bad feedback, then there's a feedback form that that reception team member will fill out and they will pass to the general manager. The reason that we've done that is that it's very easy for someone on the way out of the door to go, yeah, I had a lovely stay, thank you very much or that lightbulb blown and that carpet's dirty and then that will never make its way back to anybody, because the receptionist will go, thank, bye bye. Then crack on with the next part of their job.

So we brought those forms in place, to make sure that those things are being captured. We also have little postcard sized feedback forms that we put on the tables in the restaurants, so when someone has eaten with us, they get five short questions, and if they fill this short form out, they get the opportunity to win a Sunday dinner for two. We do a prize draw every month. So we've got little bits that we've added over a period of time to glean as much

feedback as possible, but a lot of it, I think, is down to our recruitment process and recruiting people who genuinely are there to offer a high level of service and do a good job.

I: Okay. Do you ask about their expectation in this little cards that you had or in the process of checking out?

A: No, not really. It's not… I've not really thought about that before, whether that's something that we do subconsciously. We don't consciously say what are you looking for? We tend to try and… the only pre-stay qualification of information that we tend to do if it's a wedding or an event, and what we'll do is we'll focus on things like where did you hear about us? Not really anything around what do you want from us.

I suppose because we are what we are. We're an 11-bedroom hotel, with a small restaurant and the menus are online and we do weddings and events and we'll give you all the information you want, when you come and see us for a wedding or an event, which normally is planning through to a future date. No, we don't do a lot actually. It's interesting. I've not really thought about that.

I suppose it's a double edge sword, because you could almost talk yourself into an ongoing challenge, because we're on the size that we are and only go the facilities that we have, if you start asking people potentially what their expectations are, you could almost talk yourself into a lot of pain, because someone said, well I expect a jacuzzi bath, I expect a spa, a swimming pool. I expect a feather bedspread, because I'm allergic to this and that.

Could we do more of it? Yeah, we probably could. It's not something that I think is on our radar currently to incorporate into how we do things.

I: So you mainly know about customer expectation is from this review then, about what they expect from this hotel, from this review?

A: Yeah. I suppose. It's a good question. It's not really something that I've thought about before. Because we've got a website and the website is honest, and it's factual and I suppose, if they're booking through third party sites or ringing us up, to make a booking, I suppose at that point, if I think about it consciously, we would consider the responsibility to be on the customer to maybe inform us if they've got any specific expectations.

So we are a countryside-set, 11-bedroom small country house hotel and on our website, we tell you broadly what the kit is in each of the rooms. We show you menus. We tell you what our opening hours are. You can go onto review sites and see how people view us. You can go onto social media channels and get an idea of what we're about there. \To be honest, a

lot of our customers, we guess, we anticipate, that their specific requirements or specific needs are decided on by them by the time that they make the booking with us. So they choose us for all of the things that we identify within ourselves that we communicate out in the various forms that we do and that's the reason they come to us rather than go to the Dakota or go to somewhere in the city centre. If they've got specific requirements outside of what we're already telling them we do, if they don't tell us about them, we're broadly going to go on the basis that they booked us on the understanding they knew what they were booking. So I suppose it's that duty of care that consumers have to themselves.

I: Okay, so how do I put this? You have this offering, but how do you know about your customers' need before talking to them directly? You obviously have to know about their needs when you make this offering.

A: Yeah. I think broadly speaking, in the wider sense, the customers' needs, and you touched on this early, they need a bed, they need somewhere to go to sleep. So we offer them a bed and in that bedroom, they also have a bathroom. So that meets another need. They also have a wardrobe and tea and coffee making facilities, and carpet and windows and curtains and a restaurant and a bar, and a car park. So I suppose the needs that we fulfil are very physical, very transactional.

You're paying your money and in response to you paying us the money, we are giving you this physical room. This is what your money is for. Then your specific needs, whether they are dietary, or whether they are from an accessible point of view, do you have accessible needs, again are very physical. What we are guessing, or where we are positioning ourselves in the market, is we are positioning ourselves to meet the needs of guests who are looking for quiet, tranquil, relaxed accommodation and then that is relayed in how we market ourselves through the website and through adverts and through our interactions with social media and review sites and things like that.

I think probably the pure answer of your question is, we don't have that much of a formulated strategy on needs analysis of guests before they come to us. We have supply and demand in its purest form. We supply a service if there is a demand for it, based on the decisions that we make and the quality of product that we offer. You do that with the faith and with the hope that the demand for it will be there. Then specific needs, specific expectations are very much dealt with on a reactive basis. Which we rely on the customers to tell us if they have those specific needs or those specific requirements. Does that make sense?

I:	Okay. Okay. So I've already asked you all of my questions, but maybe you have something that you think it's important that I may have overlooked during this interview? Especially about the consumer review, TripAdvisor, marketing strategy?

A:	I tend to ramble on, off subject anyway, so I think I've probably covered most of my thoughts on it, during the course of the time together. I think for me, to sum it up is from a consumer point of view, ultimately, the success or the lack of success of any business is based on the consumer, whether people are willing to part with money to use the services that you're offering, and whether they are a customer once or whether they're a customer 100 times is also a key to the success of businesses as well.

It's very difficult to acquire customers. It's very expensive to acquire new customers, whereas to maintain them and then have those customers almost become advocates for your business is true success in my mind, because you can spend tens of thousands of pounds every years, for our size of business on marketing and advertising. But the real success of advertising and marketing its not having to do it at all and actually building a reputation and building a name, and building positive sentiment with the people who use you already and a lot of that does feed into review sites and how people view you externally of their own direct experience.

So it is, the onus is on us to do a good job and look after our guests and look after our customers so that they say nice stuff about us. They might say that nice stuff sat in the office on Monday morning or they might say that nice stuff online, wherever that may be. Hopefully that nice stuff makes our way back to us, so do the issues and we can put the issues right, and then that is where the third-party sites and the review sites really hold their value. That's the only medium we have to put our voice across, our side of the interaction across for all to see. But no, I think the questions and the things that we've covered probably have covered everything that I had in mind about it and probably given me a few new things to think about as well. So no, I don't think I really have much else to add to be honest.

I:	Okay, then, thank you.

A:	No, pleasure.

I:	Thank you very much for this. This is very useful for my research.

A:	I'm glad. And valuable for me as well, as I say, we genuinely have an interest in the industry and understanding how to stay ahead of the evolution of the business. I don't think

anybody can bury their head in the sand and guess that they know everything and guess that they've got the answer to every question. It's helpful for me as well.

I: So would you like, if I finish it, with all the analysis and I've had my conclusion, would you like to have a look at it?

A: Yeah.

I: Maybe I can send you an email.

A: I would be interested to see it. Yeah, that would be great. Yeah, it would be.

I: Because, not only, like I said before, I'm not doing this only with the hoteliers, I also have these two other perspective to see. I hope it will become very, like a holistic view of this relationship.

A: Yes, that would be interesting to see

I: Yeah.

A: Excellent.

I: Yeah.

A: Good, good, and so that will be two years' time? How far through it are you?

I: Well, I've already finished my second year, so moving on to the third year, so hopefully I will finish in one and a half years.

A: Okay.

I: So fingers crossed.

A: It seems like a long time, but it will fly by, won't it?

I: Yes. I just came from Leeds, for example, last week, but tomorrow is another weekend. The times runs very, very fast, especially if you have these big jobs.

A: Yeah. Well, we keep saying to ourselves, how is already been three and a half years that we've been here and we've still got, the remainder of the work to do. It just seems incredibly that so much time has passed so quickly. Fortunately, if all goes well, we've only got about another three months of work, which is very much lighter redecoration and

remodelling, rather than demolition and rebuilding, that kind of thing. It will feel lovely to be at the end of the project, because then it will be fully back to looking at the operation, just having the day job and being able to focus on…

I: Consumer satisfaction.

A: Yeah, definitely. No more building.

I: I wish you good luck.

A: Thank you. We need every bit of positive…

[End of Audio recording 2017-11-10 10-24-36 133m 10s]

A: Reviewer, the interviewee

B: The interviewer

-Introduction, respondent was asked to read the information sheet and say her consent-

B: Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself?

A: I am in my 50s, I'm married and generally we take the holidays within the UK, staying at guest houses or hotels and alike. Mostly that is in the UK, very occasion that it will be on abroad but in the past probably 4 years, it's been predominantly in the UK. I work at the University of Nottingham, I am a student recruitment enquiries administrator. I moved to Nottingham about 2 years ago.

B: In average, how many vacations do you take per year?

A: Long vacations, by that I'm saying a week, we would take 2. But short breaks, we would probably take another 4 to 5 times in a year. So that would be maybe one night maybe 2 nights, occasionally 3.

B: Can you please tell me a little bit about how you choose the accommodation for that trip?

A: The accommodation is usually chosen very strong by where we would like to visit. So what we'd like to do is see areas in the UK that we've not been to before. A Recent example is we went to the North Yorkshire coast recently, that is our latest break. We stayed for 2 nights, I beg your pardon, we stayed for 3 nights. We stayed for the first 2 nights in Scarborough and then travel further up north of the coast to see the area that we've never been to and stay the further night there. The first accommodation that we stayed in hmm we actually booked through Booking.com and that was based on location, price and reviews, actually. So location was important because we knew we want to be within Scarborough, the price was important because the price is always important, reviews were important because you can quite often find an accommodation that is very good price but sometimes there is a reason for that so reviews were also important because it gives you an on the spot idea of

what people actually think of the accommodation as opposed to what the accommodation provides a made describe it us. So all three of those are important to making a decision.

B: So you based your expectation on the reviews then?

A: Impart yes, it's always helpful if you can see photographs as well but they don't always give you a particularly a good idea of the accommodation is going to be like. So the reviews help quite a lot.

B: So besides the reviews, what other information sources that you use to form your expectation?

A: We don't purely rely on the reviews from a given booking agent like Booking.com or TripAdvisor or anything like that. We also Google search the particular accommodation and if they have their own webpage, we look at it as well. Some smaller guest houses and hotels don't have their own website. Sometimes it is a bit more difficult to find other information, the other thing that we use to get a better idea of the area that we'll be staying in is Google maps and do a little walk around the area just to get a feel for what that particular location is actually like. That's about it really. So reviews, Google searches and Google map.

B: OK, so reviews, the website of the hotels and Google map?

A: Yes

B: Now I want to move on to the other topic of the research. You said that you've written some reviews before, can you please tell me a little bit about that?

A: Yeah, actually the most recent one again, in Scarborough, I did write a review for. Mostly because I was really surprised when we arrived at the accommodation. Looking at the photograph, it looked quite small, quite compact, when we arrived, it was enormous. It was a little tired, needed redecoration, but it was huge, it was a very big space. It exceeded my expectations, I want to put a comment about that on the website so that if somebody else

was looking at it, they realised that actually, they have a lot of room to move around, it wasn't just a small bedroom, a small kitchen area. It was somewhere where they can actually quite happy to spend a week and that wasn't clear from the information about the hotel. I'm still not sure whether it was a hotel or a guest house or quite what it was, it was like a small flat, in fact, it was described as a hotel but not any hotel that I've ever been to before.

B: So would you say that it was a satisfactory experience?

A: Very. It was, as I say, the price led us to believe that it would probably be not fantastically up to date and that was correct but it exceeded our expectation in other ways because it was much more roomy and comfortable in a lot of ways than we'd expected it, so yes, we were, it was definitely satisfactory.

B: Why did you choose to write that review?

A: Because one thing, we were asked if we would provide feedback, you tend to be if you book through an agency, and most of the time I do that because of my own experiences looking to see what other people have thought about an accommodation and so partly because we were requested to give feedback but the other reason was, on that particular occasion, it was better than we expected and I didn't feel that the information that was given about it, either by the accommodation provider or by the reviewer, really reflected what it was like. So I didn't want other people to sort of be surprised.

B: So you want to help others?

A: Yes. Yeah, because their responses help us. So in the same way, providing the review I think hopefully will help other people.

B: What about the negative experience? Have you written a review of some negative experience?

A: We have. We stayed, I'm trying to remember where it was. I remember the shower very very well because that was the cause of that negative experience. It was a short break, it was since we've been in Nottingham so it's within the last 2 years, I think it might have been

somewhere in Derbyshire, it was not long after we moved up here. We went to stay in a bed and breakfast and the shower was so tiny, the shower enclosure was so small that it was, and I'm not huge, but it wasn't particularly easy to manoeuvre. If you drop the shampoo and thinking about picking it up, it wasn't gonna happen.

B: Really? So you have to go out to pick it up?

A: Yeah, it was probably about the shoulder, my shoulder width and probably, I've never seen such a small shower enclosure. And that was, thankfully we were only there for one night. So it was only a shower each but even so, it was a challenge and neither myself nor my husband are particularly large people, if we were, we really would've struggled. I'm not sure if we would get in there. So that was something that I pointed out in the review that it was very very restricted. I was quite surprised we didn't get any response from the hotel provider. They didn't come back to us at all. They obviously know it.

B: How do you know that they know?

A: I don't know actually, I just assumed that if they offer accommodation, they have some means of assessing it. I actually don't know.

B: But have you tried talking to them directly about this problem when you were still there?

A: If we'd been staying for longer, I think we might have done. But on the basis of one night stay, no. Just move on and remember don't ever go there again. Unfortunately, I can't remember where exactly it was.

B: And you don't get this information from the review?

A: We didn't. I think somebody said the bathroom was small but I don't think anybody actually mentioned quite how small. That was not the best experience we've ever had. Apart from that, it was lovely, it was very comfortable, it was a lovely place, but the tiny bathroom and absolutely minuscule shower were not fun.

B: Have you ever received any reply to other reviews?

A: We have. When we've given positive feedback in the past, to be honest, most of the feedback that we've given tend to be positive. When we've submitted positive feedback in the past, very occasionally we will have the response back from the provider saying thank you for your comment that sort of thing. It never tends to be anything, in particular, it almost

like a stock answer, there's never been a personal response back. But even so, getting a response is quite nice.

B: So you never had any response that is personalised?

A: It doesn't feel particularly personal responses we've had, it almost like a paragraph written somewhere and in a case when somebody saying something nice then copy that paragraph stick it in response. End of story. So it hasn't been that sort of personal touch.

B: What would you prefer then?

A: Most of the time that's okay, occasionally, if you said something particularly positive about somewhere, it would be quite nice to have a slightly more personalised response back. It's not a problem, I mean I can understand that people are busy, people's priority is around the business rather than necessarily keeping track of reviews. But it would be quite nice to have a more personalised response. Even sometimes just to have dear whatever your name is, rather than dear reviewer.

B: So you always get that kind of response?

A: Yeah. It's better than no response at all I guess but quite often it's being dear reviewer rather than dear whatever the name you have or you've given. It's very often you see the review but it doesn't give a name. If I write a review very often on the website it doesn't actually give you a name, it just gives 'a couple travelling on leisure, stayed at this hotel for x night' that sort of thing rather than a personal name. But I don't know whether that's part of the reason you get a dear reviewer reply back.

B: But do you always use your name in the review?

A: I don't put it in the review itself if it's part of the form that you complete for review, the information is there but I don't put it in my written response.

B: Where did you write your review?

A: The most recent one was on Booking.com and that was, I can't remember if it's an email or a text message that came through with the link and that was to a form-based review. It gave you a couple of options like on a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate your experience,

that sort of thing and then it gave give you a little bit for free text as well, the review facility seems to vary between different places we've stayed, particularly some of the smaller hotel or guest house will have their own way of capturing the review information.

B: Do you always write a review after each stay?

A: We generally try to, sometimes it's a matter of being reminded or requested to write the review, sometimes if you get that from a short stay away, it kind of drops of the horizon and sometimes we don't write the review but we try to when we can. Purely because of my own experience in finding reviews helpful.

B: When will you post your review then?

A: Probably, it'll be a couple of days, 2 to 3 days after we return from the break. It will be quite soon after the break while it's still fresh in memory.

B: So you make sure that during that time, you write the review?

A: Yeah

B: What if the website, like Booking.com, did not give you the reminder, will you still write the review?

A: Sometimes, sometimes you can go back to their website and very often there's a link to have you stayed at this location, would you like to write a review. Some companies don't allow you to do that because there has to be some way to check that you actually have stayed at the location and if you can just go on to the website then anybody can do that and say yeah I stayed at the hotel or yeah I stayed and it's wonderful.

B: For you negative review, you didn't get any response but for your positive review you had a response, how did you feel about not getting a response from the hotel?

A: A little bit disappointed but I don't really know what they could say other than 'yeah, we know the bathroom is small'. It's not something that they can easily sort out. I can understand why they didn't write a response, it could've been, would've been probably quite nice to get something along the line 'oh I'm really sorry that you felt that but in our description, we have mentioned that the bathroom is small' that sort of thing. I can't even

remember whether they've mentioned it, I know somebody mentioned it, it's small, I think some of the reviewers mentioned and not them. Yes, so a slight sense of disappointment perhaps but it's not a massive deal if somebody doesn't make a response. I don't really expect it. Whether it's a positive or a negative.

B: Will you share your dissatisfaction with other people?

A: Yes, yeah. If we've been asked about a trip away and where we've stayed, if somebody says 'oh would you go back there or do you think we ought to go?' then yes, we usually give them an honest response to 'yeah it's fine or no, I actually wouldn't'

B: Because you want to help people

A: Yeah, yeah, again, yeah

B: From the reply that you had from the positive review, do you remember who gave the response? Does it matter to you?

A: It doesn't really, I'm not absolutely certain, who it would've come from. Whether it comes from the hotel itself or whether it comes from the agency. I honestly, I think it comes from the hotel, but to be honest I've never really thought to check into it. Probably because a response to the review is nice to have but it's not something that would change my mind whether or not I'd made a return visit. And that decision is made by how you actually felt about staying somewhere.

B: So if you had this negative experience and then you write the review and you receive a nice reply, you won't ever consider going back?

A: It's unlikely unless the negative response was about something fixable. Say for example we turned up in an accommodation and we've been told that somebody is going to meet us to get into the property and nobody was there to meet us, I understand that occasionally things happen. It actually happened to us in Houston fairly enough, we turned up, having flown across to Houston, went to where we were staying and there was nobody there to meet us, we sat on a porch for about an hour but when they got back, we found out why. They had to take their son to the hospital, quite understandable. Their priority wasn't telling

people who were arriving what was going on, their priority was to get their son to the hospital. In that sort of circumstance, there are, you wouldn't hold that against the hotel if on the other hand, you turned up and you registered in your hotel, went into your room and it was absolutely filthy dirty, hasn't been changed you went down and made a complain about it and they weren't happy to sort out, then I definitely wouldn't be happy to go back. They would be a negative review from me and however nice they were in response, if they hadn't sort it out at the time or couldn't sort it out before the return visit, I wouldn't be going back. So it very much depends on the situation and also the review that you give and the response comes back to me, whether or not it would change my mind.

B: So the source doesn't matter?

A: Not really, not so much

B: Because especially on TripAdvisor where there are lots of hotels who's been giving the reply, there is a different kind of people who's been answering the review, there's the general manager, some staff, so you wouldn't consider it at all then?

A: No, I don't think so. If somebody replies on behalf of an institution or organisation or accommodation, I don't think it matters who that person is, as long as they represent that organisation reasonably. Politely, fairly, I don't think it matters what their position is, whether the manager or the lady at reception, really doesn't matter.

B: Have you ever experienced that you have this complaint and you tell the hotel and they rectify the problem at that moment so you don't complain?

A: Yes, we stayed in a hotel in Madrid and the wardrobe door fell off. It was a sliding door, we slid it one way and it came off the runners. It was absolutely hilarious. My husband and I were stood there holding the door, wondering what to do. We tried to put it back on the rail and we couldn't. So I stood there and held the door so it didn't fell on the floor. My husband went down to reception, got somebody to come back up with him and they fixed it immediately. Between the two of them, they just put it back on the rail so it worked the rest of the week that we were there. So yes, there was an initially negative experience, I don't even think unless it was jokingly, I don't even think we mention in the review, we did review that hotel because that was really nice as well. Perfect location and it was a lovely place to stay, proper hotel.

B: Did you receive a reply from them?

A: No, not from that one but it doesn't matter at all. The important thing was when we had the problem at the time, it was rectified. Rectified with lots of laughter as well. Cause they thought it was funny too.

B: But it was also dangerous.

A: It probably could've been, if we had a young family, yes. It could've been a little bit more of a problem but for two adults, it was more of an inconvenience and a surprise than anything else.

B: About the response that you received for your positive review, how long did it take them to reply to you?

A: That was, I think it was within a week. And I seem to remember that we had something even an email or a text message to say there's been a response to your review.

B: So you don't have to check

A: You don't have to check, you'll notify, which again is quite a good idea. If it was left to us to check, we probably wouldn't.

B: So you wouldn't consider checking to your review to see if there's some response there?

A: It's probably unlikely. We're much more likely to look if somebody told us there's been a response. I don't think, unless it had been a particularly negative experience and we expected somebody to come back with a comment, I don't think we'd go looking for it. And we've never been in that experience, in that situation.

B: Because you've only written a negative review once?

A: I can't remember writing a negative review of anybody else apart from the shower people. But equally, there's nothing they can do about it, they can't suddenly create a bathroom that's larger so I don't know.

B: Have other tourist contacted you directly about your review?

A: No, we never had that. There wouldn't be a problem if they did. If we stayed somewhere and somebody asks what did you really think, that's fine, the chances are, what I really think is what's in the review. We tend to be polite but if there is something that is not ideal, it's likely that we'll mention it. It won't necessarily be negative, I would say realistic rather than necessarily negative. But yes, if somebody got in contact and said 'you stayed at the hotel in Scarborough for example, what do you think?'. Is it accessible for the wheelchair, is it noisy, is it roomy, questions like that I would be quite happy to answer it. Because it's factual reply, it's not based on opinion. Opinion is slightly more difficult because it's subjective as to what we think of somewhere. My sister, for example, would've hated where we stayed in Scarborough, it would not be somewhere she would feel comfortable. Because she used to a different type of accommodation to me and my husband. So subjective opinion, I'd find that more difficult to answer. But factually, yes, if somebody asks I'd be happy to answer.

B: But no one has ever contacted you?

A: No, nobody has come back to us.

B: So you never check your review but you always get the notification if you receive a reply from the hotel?

A: The couple of times that we have, we've been aware that there's been a response from the hotel because we've been notified that there's been a response.

B: Then you read the reply?

A: Yes, I'm thinking about it. That will only have been through one of the agencies like Booking.com or TripAdvisor because they are the people that have our login, if you like, to Booking.com, LateRooms, I think is another one. So we log in to our account with them before we book the accommodation. So they would have our contact details, for the smaller bookings, unless they keep a record, I don't know whether they do or they don't, but unless they keep a specific record of our email address, I'm not sure how they would contact us. They usually have that sort of information when you do book though because they usually want to have some information from you, and even if you don't need to provide it at the time of booking, very often when we check in, we need to give them a little bit more information like address, car registration, that sort of thing. I would've thought they will need the email address as well. But I don't remember getting a response from a small individual hotel or guesthouses.

B: Have you ever experienced that you want to book a hotel but there's no review of this hotel?

A: It puts us off a little bit purely because you are only going on the description that's provided and descriptions are generally positive about the accommodation that they are describing. They aren't necessarily 100% honest in my opinion, they tend to be slandered toward giving you a nice picture of it rather than necessarily honest. So if there aren't review in addition, it probably wouldn't be top of the list that we want to consider. I wouldn't say that we would reject it an end of the hand, but the review helps quite a lot because they are, I hope, real people that have stayed there.

B: Have you ever - because you said you hope - have you ever stumbled upon a review that you think is not really true?

A: Yes, they tend to be really glowing ones and you think 'I wonder if it's somebody's auntie who's been suggested go on and give us a great review, we'll be fine, look at more business'. Sometimes you wonder, I don't know if that's prevalent or not and in general you don't rely on a single review anyway. In fact, one of the things that we do, probably instigates through this is, look at the worst ones first then look at the best ones then look at the ones in the middle and then make your mind up.

B: So you will read all the reviews then?

A: Not necessary all of them but a selection of them. He (her husband) very much like to look at the bad ones, I like to look at the best ones, we compromise on looking at the ones in the middle as well.

B: So if you're going to make this decision, how many reviews will you read, how do you know that you had enough information to make a decision?

A: You don't. At the end of the day, it's a judgment call, whenever you make a booking. It's the same as buying something on Amazon, we would do similar process: look at the bad reviews, look at the good reviews, have a look at a couple of random ones, just to get to know an overall feel and it's exactly the same with booking accommodation. You certainly

not going to read all of them because some of them there, particularly on TripAdvisor, there gonna be hundreds of them and there's no way that we read all of them. But just try to get a general picture and also look at the date of the review, that's definitely relevant for accommodation. There's no point in looking at one from 2010 because the chances are it's not like that anymore. So that hadn't occurred to me before, yeah, the date is another thing that's quite important looking at reviews.

B: What about the reply then, is it important for you to get a fast response?

A: No. As I said, I don't really expect a response very often. It's nice if you do but it isn't expected so it's not something that's particularly important to me.

B: What about if you're considering to book this hotel, will you also read the reply from the hotel when you read the review?

A: Usually it is displayed anyway, so usually you will see it. Sometimes if there has been a negative review, we would specifically read the response because that gives you the indication of whether or not hotel care.

B: So care is important then?

A: Yes, it is. I don't think we go out of our way to look for responses from hotels but if they are displayed then it's easy to do it then we will look at. We wouldn't make a particular point to do that but if it's available we'll have a look.

B: What about if you read this negative response and the hotel only give a standard comment, the one that might be just copied and paste from somewhere?

A: Again, that is something that will slightly off-putting because if the hotel doesn't care enough to respond to other people, the chances are if we had a problem, they wouldn't care that much about responding to us or sorting the problem out for us either. So in response to a negative review, I think a standardise response is worse than no response at all.

B: What happens if the other around, the response for the negative review was really good that the promise to do something?

A: It would probably give us some warm feeling about staying there because you would feel that you would be less into if you raise the problem. I got a feeling that one of the places we booked in Birmingham when we stayed in Birmingham, they had a review about somebody going into a room that's smelling like cigarette, of course, they're all smoke-free now, and they moved them, they put them in a different room and I don't think that it probably made any difference to make us making a decision to stay there, but I do have a memory of seeing that is a response, but that wasn't then the hotel coming back to the customer on the basis of their review, it something that was sorted out at the time.

B: Will the reply change your perception?

A: It might do, if somebody leaves a negative review and the hotel came back to them and apologise and it was a positive thing, I think it would change the perspective a little bit, purely because you would feel that the hotel actually care about its customer and it wasn't just a case of while you were physically there but actually care about their customer possibly returning or possibly giving information to other customers that might affect their choices to whether their stay.

B: So the most important thing is showing that they care?

A: I think so. I think that's what the whole review process is about, really. If you care enough to leave a response so that other people can possibly benefit from it, and then for the hotel, if they make a response, to demonstrate the level of care themselves as well.

B: So after you've written the review, what did you feel?

A: Generally, quite happy, Quite happy that we've done something that might helps somebody else who's looking at that particular hotel.

B: What about after writing the negative one?

A: Again, happy that we were flagging up the fact that it was not ideal. There's not a sense of anger or iritation or anything like that. It's more focus on other people having the information that we didn't have before went there. Needless to say, it's not somewhere we'd go and stay again, but you can, you know, even if they came back and said we'll change it to a different room and it's got the wonderful bathroom, I don't think we would stay there again. Probably

because it felt slightly dishonest that it wasn't mentioned beforehand. I think it comes back to the whole care thing again, you know, do you care enough about your customer to mention that. My friend just got married a couple of months ago and we stayed in Bicester and we tried to book online but the online booking system for some reason did not work, so I actually phoned the lady and she was, I thought she was amazing because she actually said to me, it's a couple staying isn't so I said yeah, she said 'you do realise it's something called a French double?' which I never heard of. And I said no, we didn't realise that, why? And she said it's very compact. When we arrived, she was dead right. It was extremely compact, the bed was up against the wall one side, it was just a narrow space down the bed on the other side, it's fine because she already warned us. She had that level of care that you don't just say to people 'yes there's a double bed in it', the guest turn up and there's a problem to have. So that was a very positive experience, it wasn't from the review, it was from the call. I think it all comes back to the same thing about somebody caring about the service they're providing, people caring enough to flag up to others whether or not it's been a good or a bad experience.

B: So for this one, you made the decision without looking at the review first?

A: Yes, on the basis that we had a wedding coming up very shortly, we knew that we need to stay in Bicester, there wasn't much available, so that was a little bit unusual. We originally wanted to stay in Oxford which is where my friend lives, but when we tried to book in Oxford, it was either fully booked or ridiculously expensive. So we thought Bicester was the closest and they were actually getting married in Bicester but again, quite a lot of the accommodation in Bicester was already fully booked so it was a case of if this has places then we're going for it, it doesn't matter. As it turned out, it was a positive experience, it may not have been, it may have gone the other way.

B: Because you already know what to expect?

A: Yes, you know you're not going to walk in in a huge room, she's already said it's compact, she's right, it was. But that's fine. We were there 2 nights and it really didn't matter. We had somewhere to sleep, we had somewhere to shower, that was fine. The expectations were managed.

B: So it's very important to manage the expectation.

A: I think that comes back to the positive review, the booking in Scarborough, when we turned up it was much bigger than we expected so I think that was probably why we pointed out in our review, it's actually a selling point and you're not making the most of it. Other people might want to know that. If they want to go and stay in Scarborough for a week, that's actually a really good place to go because you're not gonna be cramped in a tiny room for a week, you actually got a lot of places to relax in. So yeah, it's expectations and caring about what other people will experience as well.

- Closing –

End, 41m 58s

INT: Thank you very much for this opportunity. First of all, can you please say your consent in the recorder?

RES: Yes, I give my consent for this interview.

INT: Thank you. Now can you please explain a little bit about yourself like, you name, your occupation, your age, if that's not a problem with you and a little bit about your background.

RES: Yeah okay, so may name is David (pseudonym). I'm 49 years old, I work in the University of Nottingham in the school of Education in the CELE directorate, which is the centre of English Language and Education. I'm also doing a Doctorate Degree in Education and I have…I was born here in Nottingham but then I lived abroad for quite a few years. And eventually I came full circle and returned to my home.

INT: All right and about your experience and having these trips – can you tell me a little bit about them?

RES: Yeah, they were all kind of, initially, work related because after my first degree I then got an English Language teaching qualification so then I worked abroad in Spain for a year, I returned to the UK and met my future wife in London who was from Brazil. And then she decided to go back to Brazil to finish her degree so I followed her. And I spent three years living and working in Brazil. I got married in Brazil, I learned Portuguese. We lived in various locations in Brazil, in the south in the centre, in the south-east. And then I returned to the UK and got my masters degree and then I thought I wanted to earn loads of money so I went to the Middle East, United Arab Emirates, so I could save up to buy a house back here in the UK. So I worked in Abu Dhabi Emirate for three years, came back and then I was lucky enough to get a job here at the University of Nottingham.

INT: Okay, what about the trips for your holiday? Do you have this…how many times do you go…?

RES: A year?

INT: Yes. And with who?

RES: Normally just my wife. We go…normally we go twice a year. One is an extended holiday of a week or two and the other one is normally of a shorter duration. Normally, these days for the last four years we've been going on cycling holidays.

INT: So you cycle all the way through?

RES: Yeah, these holidays they organise it so you arrive at the place where you want to go on your cycle tour and then they take your luggage from one hotel to the next. So you just have a bike and every morning, you know, you move to the next point at the end of that destination of your new hotel with your luggage. So it's all kind of, it's not guided, we don't have somebody cycling with us. They just provide all the accommodation and the bikes and the information about the area.

INT: Interesting.

RES: You can eat as much as you want on the holiday and not put on any weight. So that's great.

INT: Genius! About the process in choosing your holiday and maybe choosing this particular tour or cycle…how do you find that information?

RES: Erm…it's always online these days. I mean, I have never been to a travel agency in my life.

INT: Okay.

RES: We normally just initially just do a Google search. And we look for companies that have this kind of holiday package and then we use our critical thinking skills and start to look at different websites, you know, you have to make judgments online because you can never be 100% sure. You know, you look for things like the ABTA mark and then, you know, we make decisions based on the look of the company but also on the price and of course the reviews.

INT: Okay, so which website do you use most of then?

RES: Generally, the websites we use are things like, one of the companies are called Bike Tours, which is company, I mean, if you just typed in Google, bike tours, Europe, it provides these different packages across Europe. And because we've used them before we know they're trustworthy. On one occasion a few years ago, we cycled in Wester Ireland and then

we used a different company. It was basically a cycling enthusiast that had set up this small business himself in Scotland. But, I think it's just using your own personal judgment and not being stupid. And I think the companies that run these kind of cycling holidays are normally quite ethical anyway. You know, they're normally run by people, I think, you can trust.

INT: (inaudible)?

RES: Yeah, I think a lot of them are, yeah. For me cycling is very important. I cycle to work every day. I cycle on holiday. If I don't cycle in a day I start to feel a bit crazy. I've got to get on my bike. So I think it's an area of tourism, which it is more ethical, it's greener, and therefore, maybe I'm being naïve but I think normally these people are more trustworthy.

INT: Okay. All right then, so you choose this company and then accommodation will follow?

RES: Yeah.

INT: They will provide you with an itinerary. So you've got day one and day three, it shows you the distance between the hotels. And then you normally…I mean, the kind of holidays I go for are normally two or three star accommodations, you know, not impressive stuff but that's not the point of the holiday anyway. And they assign you hotels. But what I normally do once I've got the itinerary I will actually go online and look at the hotels and then start to drill down and look at the images, I look at what they offer and I also look at the reviews…

INT: Of the hotels?

RES: Yeah.

INT: So you will be able to ask the operator to change the hotel if you find something that's…?

RES: Yeah, they do. Some of them are open to that. But I've never tried. But I know there is a proviso where I think they say, if you're not happy with this particular type of accommodation, there are opportunities for you to request something else. But for me it's just a place to bed down, have breakfast, eat before the next day, really. I'm not looking for a jacuzzi or a bar in the hotel room.

INT: Only to rest?

RES: To rest, yeah. But we've stayed in some really nice places. I mean, really gorgeous places and they're only two or three stars. I mean, we went on a cycling holiday in Holland around Eindhoven and one day we stayed in this beautiful hotel on the shore of a lake and it was a really hot summer. It was like 40 degrees Celsius cycling through that all day. You felt like, at the end of the day, a baked potato. But I remember we got to the hotel, changed, showered and there was this wonderful veranda on the shore of the lake and we both had a cold Heineken, great minds ha! So I don't think you have to spend loads of money on great accommodation. You know, I've stayed in expensive places, which have been awful.

INT: Hmm, okay. So you read reviews for this particular companies who run these bicycles and also the reviews about the hotel itself…

RES: Yeah.

INT: And when you read the reviews what kind of information do you usually want to get from the review?

RES: For me it's…well, I think, number one is quality of service. You know, are the staff amiable, are they friendly? You know, things like food, cleanliness of the room, that is something which is important for me. Location because I don't know if this has happened to you but, I've stayed in a lot of places but sometimes in very noisy, central the location just ruins the whole experience. So yeah, it's food, staff, how clean the room is, location.

INT: And when reading the reviews, you will get positives, negatives and also something in the middle. Do you have some preference in reading the reviews?

RES: Well, I tend to focus on the negatives.

INT: On the negatives?

RES: Yeah. I think it's a natural response, isn't it? Then again, of course I know that for one person it could be great for another person…it's all subjective opinion and sometimes I think people are a bit unfair in the kind of reviews they write. Some people have very high expectations and if the room or the hotel isn't perfect then they tend to say very negative things but, you know, I scan through them. But I tend to first look at the negatives and if there is some horrendous review then that will start to…alarm bells will start ringing in my mind if I see that. But I also look at the positives too.

INT: Okay. So you will take all of this information into…I mean, the kind of person who is writing this and then you will…

RES: Yeah.

INT: And will you make a decision directly after you read reviews?

RES: Yeah, normally I will, yeah. Because for me it's, you know, life is busy. It's one of many chores of tasks you have to do in a day. I mean, I do rely on reviews a lot. It's not just for holidays it's for online shopping or whatever. You know, often if I see, don't buy this! I won't buy it.

INT: So it really affects you then?

RES: I think it does, yeah. I think in a way the internet has allowed or it has provided more power for the consumer. Because if you buy something online in…you know, a new pair of shoes and find that three reviews have said they fall apart after a month, you're not going to buy them. So, yeah, I think it does play a…and my wife is very, how can I put it? She's very laser-like, you know, she wants to get value for money. So she's even more…

INT: So research a lot?

RES: Oh my God! My wife, really…we've had arguments about this before. She goes through every single step of the holiday. I hope this is going to be anonymised. But no, she really is very…she comes from Brazil and in Brazil consumer rights are less protected than they are over here in the UK so in Brazil people get treated very badly by the private companies sometimes. An example being, I found out recently my sister in law in Brazil, you know, she bought a brand new three piece suite, you know, chairs and armchairs – they started to fall to pieces and she tried to return it but they didn't have any return policy, they just ignored her. In the UK you get more consumer rights. I think that's why Denise, my wife, she tends to make sure that nobody is trying to pull a fast one over us.

INT: What about you, how many reviews will you have to read before you are convinced?

RES: It depends on whether they're positive or negative. If I see two or three negative reviews about a hotel or anything then I will probably say, that's not what I want – I'm not going for that. But if I see a lot of positive reviews, you know, normally, again, it's probably the same number two, three, four you think, wow! There must be something good about this place.

INT: All right. And whenever you read this review have you ever seen a response from the company? From the hotel itself?

RES: Not in hotel accommodation. But I have seen responses on, for example, Amazon shopping where customers have made, you know, enquiries or complaints about a product and then the company have responded. And that's reassuring because at least you know that the company is engaging in this process. But I've never seen it on a…

INT: On the hotel reviews?

INT: No. But what do you feel when you see this kind of message from the hotel? Will that affect your decision?

RES: Hmm it would. I mean, if the company is prepared to interact with this complaint, with this feedback and it shows that there is some kind of responsibility shown by that company. So that would be reassuring if I did.

INT: Okay and what if you don't see this message?

RES: Then it would have the opposite effect. I've had experiences before where I've made complaints and there has been no response.

INT: Is it about a hotel accommodation or?

RES: Not about hotel accommodation, unfortunately. Just about other things.

INT: And what did you feel when you get no response?

RES: Anger.

INT: Okay so you expect them to?

RES: Oh yeah. Isn't that their role? They're selling their services and they're supposed to interact with the customer. Are they crazy? They're not going to interact? The screw up and they don't respond! They've taken your money so that's the end of the story. Not a good way to behave.

INT: Will you tell this story to other people?

RES: Oh yeah. Yes, if somebody crosses me. I mean, a case in point being recently one of my bikes, my wife was riding it to work and it was crushed by a lorry and she was very close…she was crossing a road a lorry didn't see her and ran over the back of the bike. My wife had to scramble out from under the…

INT: But she was okay?

RES: She was okay but it was a close thing. Immediately afterwards the driver of the lorry and the company apologised and promised to pay for the damage to the bike, a brand-new bike, but months and months later they still hadn't paid. We tried everything apart from going to the courts to claim for our losses. They don't care. So my wife, you know, there are online sources where you can review local businesses. She's told the story to all these online forums so people are aware. We contacted our local council, councillors, our parliamentary representative, the police. I mean the company that crushed my bike they were employed by the local police authority. So, it was a mess. But the point of the story is I know that this company is not trustworthy – if it's not prepared to take its responsibilities seriously in that instance you know that's it's probably been run by a group of idiots.

INT: And you haven't heard anything back from them?

RES: We've tried everything. I mean, they have responded but, initially, it was, yeah, we're going to pay you directly. What's your account details? I gave them, the money didn't appear. My wife asked again and again eventually it came down just to silence, not answering our phone calls. Not responding to emails. So, yeah, it's injustice especially because my wife could have been killed in that instance. That's what makes me so angry about that situation. She survived – she's fine.

INT: Okay about your experience in staying in hotels or accommodation like that. Have you ever complained to your hotel?

RES: You see, I'm British – British people don't complain…

INT: I've heard that a lot.

RES: My wife is always saying, why don't you tell them? So, normally it's my wife. If there is an issue she will immediately make her complaint heard by somebody. But for the British, you know, if you're in a restaurant and you have a dreadful meal. You don't say anything you just say, thank you, and pay up. It's a terrible cultural trait.

INT: But why is that?

RES: I don't know – I think, we're kind of…out culture, maybe it's because we're all stuck together on a tiny island. We're kind of conflict adverse. You know, we have quite silly cultural morays and rules. But direct conflict is something which we view with horror. We just find it very embarrassing. So, you know, that's probably why we have so many consumer rights organisations in the UK because we're not prepared to stick up for ourselves.

INT: You need someone to…?

RES: We need a charity or an organisation to do it for us. But no, Denise will, if there is an issue she's very direct. She will tell them this is not right.

INT: Is that probably why you never write a review because your wife has already complained to somebody?

RES: Probably, yeah. I mean, to be honest with you I'm a bit lazy. I don't really understand why people write reviews for anything. But I appreciate it…

INT: But you're using…

RES: I'm appreciative…it's like, wow that's really useful. But I just think…maybe it's because I lack some kind of, I don't know, social conscious or something. But I've never written a review for anything. Oh no! that's a lie! I did write a review a one liner for this phone recently, actually. It's a Moto Motorola G5…

INT: Why?

RES: Because I was so happy with it. I mean, this phone was £170 it's got all the same functions as a Samsung Galaxy but it's like one third of the price. So I've always bought Moto G phones because I don't understand how people are prepared to spend a thousand pound on an iPhone, which is out of date within six months. I'm the kind of person that I love technology but I'm not an initial uptaker, I don't buy things immediately because it's there. I wait and see and then I buy it a more economical option.

INT: But then you update it every six months?

RES: No. My last Motorola phone I had for three and a half years. It was like first generation smartphone – by the end it was obviously needed to retire. I'm not brand loyal but I like Motorola, which is now owned actually by Lenovo. I like them because you get all the same functions but it doesn't have the catchy, oh it's not a Samsung it's not an iPhone – I don't care. If it does that job that's all I want.

INT: Okay, so if you feel really happy then it makes you want to write a review. But that doesn't happen…

RES: It doesn't happen very often, no. on one occasion. Maybe I should engage more. Who knows.

INT: But then whenever you want to go somewhere or whenever you want to take this cycling package will you always read reviews before?

RES: Yeah, always, yeah. Especially with Denise next to me, you know, she's like a detective. You know, she sieves through all the information.

INT: And when you experience the one that you are committed to and then you compare it with the reviews – how is that?

RES: I would say generally they kind of match up quite well. I've never been with these cycling holidays, I've never been surprised at how bad it is. You know, after having looked at the reviews. So, I think, I think if you take quite a holistic qualitative look at them, you know, scan and look at them you can get an overall impression of what they're like. But, yeah, I think generally they ring true. Of course, you always read in the newspapers about people being vindictive, customers, you know. And writing terrible things. But, I've never had that experience where I've felt, oh those reviews were totally wrong.

INT: Okay. So in a way, it can give you information when you form your expectation of this?

RES: Yeah, I like having some kind of expectation. I like to have an idea of the kind of place it will be. And I think not only the reviews but also, you know, just reading the descriptions of the hotels all of that kind of…

INT: When you're in the process of choosing this accommodation or the operator will you also ask around your friends or relatives besides looking at information online?

RES: Not really. Because, for example, my parents they tend to go on package holidays, you know, flights, hotel, eat as much as you want, you know, Mediterranean kind of holiday. My older brother always goes on cruises, my younger brother never seems to go on holiday. None of my friends go on cycling holidays so it wouldn't…it's like a totally different world, holiday world. I have to rely on the reviews, really.

INT: I have this example of reviews and the response – so you've never seen this kind of response whenever you see?

RES: No, no. maybe they're there I just haven't looked carefully enough.

INT: Okay, so you don't care about the response then? You're only interested about reading the reviews?

RES: Yeah, yeah. It's probably because I'm quite slapdash when it comes to these things. Maybe my wife reads them. Do you want me to read these?

INT: Well, I just want to ask you about the source of this message – so because some hotels assign the general manager to give a response or maybe some staff. Do you think it will matter to you?

RES: If I did I think I would like the top person to respond to the reviews. The manager of the hotel.

INT: Why is that?

RES: Well, because they kind of have that authority or ability to make changes. I mean, if it's somebody lower down the hierarchy, you know, it may simply be them reflectively responding but not really, you know, you want a bit of ear time with the top person, don't you?

INT: About the message itself. You said that you've read some reply but not for accommodation…

RES: Yeah.

INT: What do you feel about the message? Because some of them send like a standard one, copy and paste or something…

RES: Oh, I don't like that.

INT: Okay so it has to be…

RES: Personalised, yeah. The ones I've seen it could be people asking questions about a product, a company or it's on a review and then you get a response explaining how the thing should be used or work. That kind of thing for me, it gives a good impression. It means that

they're going beyond process. It's not simply a reactive process to the situation they are actually taking bit of time to help somebody that has paid for their product.

INT: So whenever you read a review and then the response from the company, not necessarily for the accommodation. Do you also take notice on the time that the companies reply?

RES: No. that's something to consider, really, isn't it? Because you want an immediate response, really, don't you? If it's like months later it's not good.

INT: Yeah. So I think I've…oh the last one. So, you read these reviews…

RES: Yes.

INT: Do you have information about the service quality from these reviews?

RES: My service quality, what do you mean?

INT: The quality of the service?

RES: Okay, I think you can start to form a judgment. It gives you a strong indication. But, like I say, I think face to face personal experience will really give you the answers. I mean, reviews are useful but, you know, and in my case always have been but, like I say, after reading reviews and going to a hotel I've never been, oh my God! This is terrible! You know, it's never happened to me.

INT: So far, a good experience?

RES: Yeah, I think reviews are good. I think they provide more rights to consumer, more choices, more options, more information.

INT: So, I think I've finished my questions.

RES: Okay.

INT: But, when I transcribe it and then I realise that I've missed a question can I come back to you?

RES: Of course, you can – it's a pleasure.

End - 29m 2s

# Appendix L: Consumers' motivations for participating in e-WOM

General Motivation Category	Specific Motivations	Examples of Items[b]
1. Personal	• Self-expression • Self-enhancement • Status/power/prestige • Extraversion • Venting negative feelings • Revenge • Gaining self-esteem • Self-discovery • Self-reference	I feel good when I can tell others about my buying successes The company harmed me, and now I will harm the company
2. Social benefits	• Group attachment • Interconnectivity • Sense of belonging • Group commitment • Meeting friends and nice people • Group reference	It is fun to communicate this way with other people in the community I meet nice people this way
3. Social concern	• Efficacy • Concern for other consumers • Being helpful to others • Future exchange with others • Expectancy: providing but also getting advice	I want to help others with my own positive experiences I expect to receive tips or support from other users
4. Functional	• Time saving • Purposive value • Learning to consume • Getting information • Solving problems • Making decisions	Learning how to do things Making better decisions
5. Quality assurance	• Consumer empowerment • Enforcing service excellence • Influence on companies	I believe companies are more accommodating when I publicize the matter
6. Economic incentives	• Getting rewards or incentives • Remuneration	I receive a reward for the writing
7. Entertainment	• Fun, amusement, and relaxation • Need to unwind from daily responsibilities • Extending experience • Escape	To be entertained To relax
8. Helping the company	• Stimulate success of company • Good companies should be supported	I am so satisfied with a company and its product that I want to help the company to be successful

a. Based on a literature review: Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003); Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004); Wang and Fesenmaier (2003); Wang and Fesenmaier (2004); Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Klein Pearo (2004); Zhao and Deek (2004); Sangwan (2005); Bonaccorsi and Rossi (2006); Huang, Chou, and Lan (2007); Gretzel and Yoo (2007).
b. Items taken from the literature.

(Bronner and de Hoog, 2011, p. 18)

Appendix M: Sequential models of decision-making process
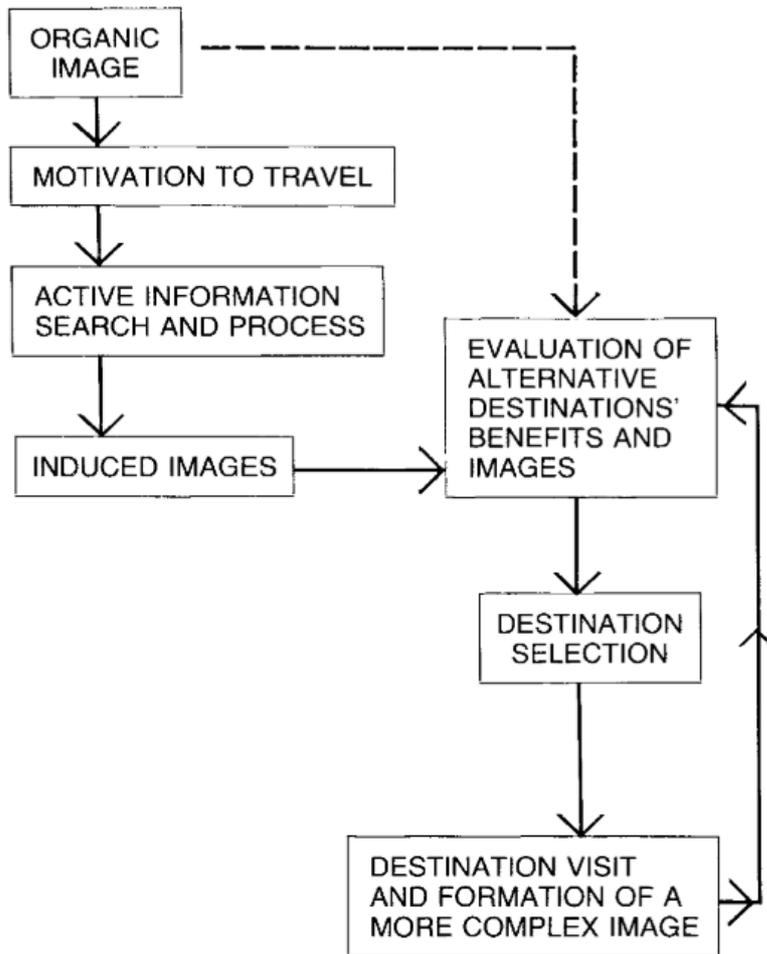
Figure 6-2 A Model of Tourist's Image Formation Process
(Fakeye and Crompton, 1991, p. 11)
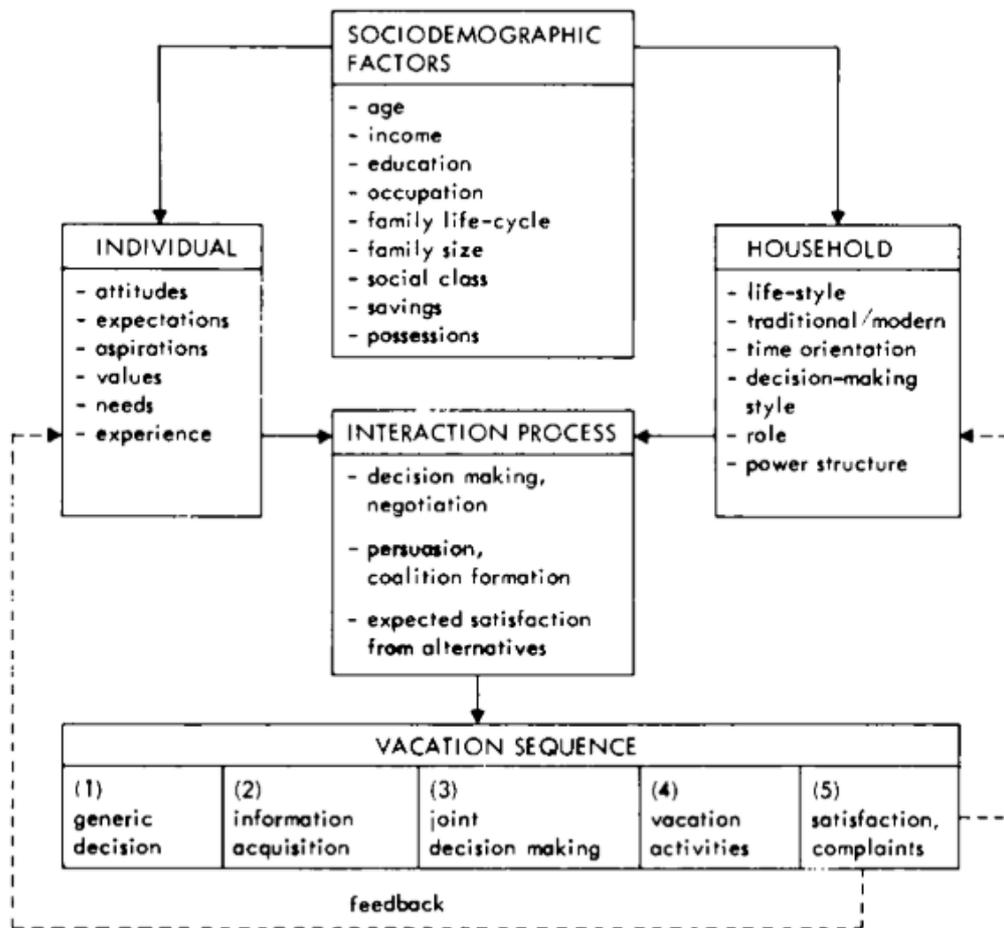
Figure 6-3 Factors Determining the Vacation Sequence

(van Raaij and Francken, 1984, p. 103)

GENERAL MODEL OF TRAVELER LEISURE
DESTINATION AWARENESS AND CHOICE

TRAVELER VARIABLES

• Previous Destination Experience
• Life Cycle, Income, Age
• Lifestyles, Value System

MARKETING VARIABLES

• Product Design
• Pricing
• Advertising/Personal Selling
• Channel Decisions

DESTINATION AWARENESS

Consideration Set	Inert Set
Unavailable/ Aware Set	Inept Set

AFFECTIVE ASSOCIATIONS

TRAVELER DESTINATION PREFERENCES

INTENTIONS TO VISIT

SITUATIONAL VARIABLES
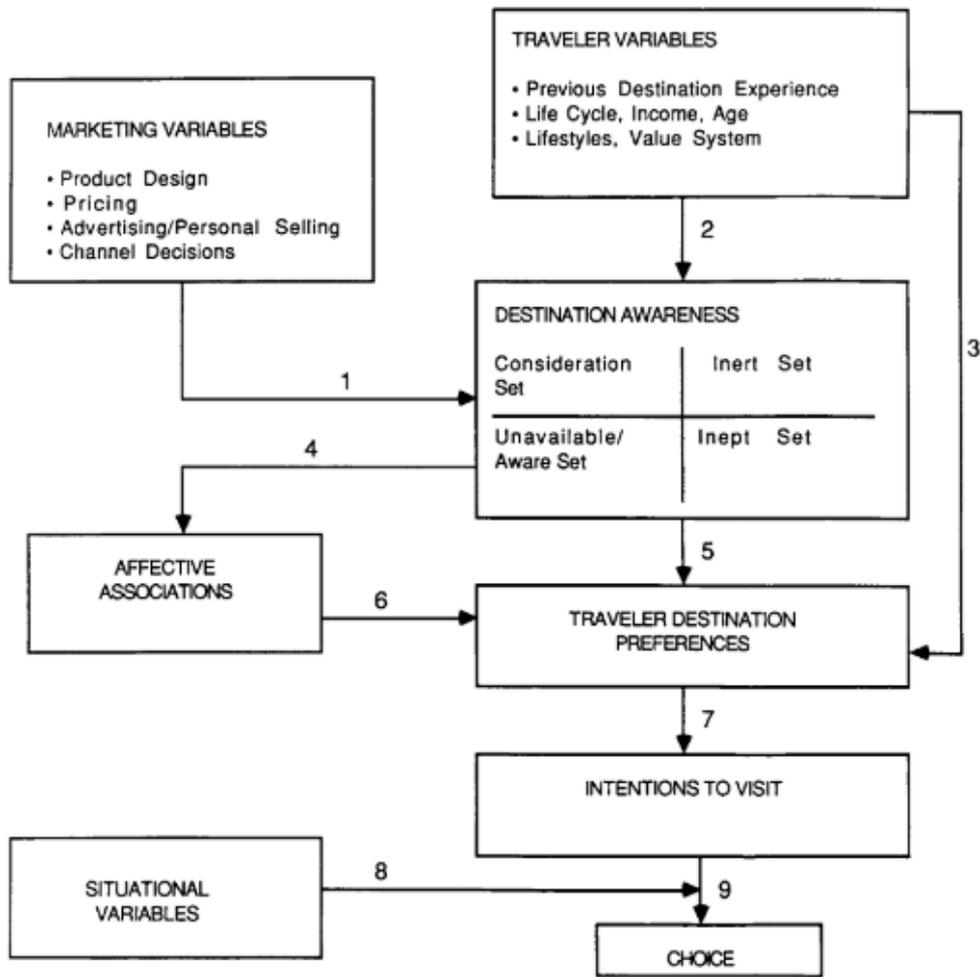
CHOICE

Figure 6-4 General Model of Traveler Leisure Destination Awareness and Choice

(Woodside and Lysonski, 1989, p. 9)