



**USER-GENERATED CONTENT (UGC) IN TOURISM: BENEFITS  
AND CONCERNS OF ONLINE CONSUMERS**

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## USER-GENERATED CONTENT (UGC) IN TOURISM: BENEFITS AND CONCERNS OF ONLINE CONSUMERS

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the views of travel consumers that search for information online in relation to the specific benefits and concerns identified with user-generated content (UGC). Real contrasts in relation to views about UGC content were identified in the literature. For instance, UGC is perceived as being 'credible' or 'not credible' as an information source depending upon the view of the user. The paper reports research that examined the use of UGC by online travel consumers, sourced from an Australian tourism organisation's online subscriber database. The study highlighted a similar range of areas that were seen as benefits and concerns in the use of UGC to support travel decisions as identified in the literature – and also similar contrasts. The most notable of these is the level of trustworthiness and reliability that is associated with the postings – they can be trusted because they are 'real' experiences by 'real' people who are independent – but can also be not trustworthy because the content that is posted may be faked by someone with a vested interest. Similar paradoxes existed elsewhere. One of the theoretical contributions of the paper is the derivation of a matrix for classifying recommendations associated with online UGC.*

**Keywords:** tourism; websites; user-generated content; benefits; concerns; survey

# USER-GENERATED CONTENT (UGC) IN TOURISM: BENEFITS AND CONCERNS OF ONLINE CONSUMERS

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Consumers are increasingly using different strategies to find information on the Internet about products or services they are intending to purchase. Senecal and Nantel (2004) discuss literature that relates consumers' choices in relation to such information sources to the *type* of product or service being sought, noting that goods can possess either *search* or *experience* qualities. Information about goods with search qualities can be determined prior to purchase – that is, much can be found out about the product or service beforehand. Information about goods with experience qualities cannot easily be determined before purchase, and it is for these types of goods that consumers will often rely heavily on product recommendations from others. Travel products and services fall directly into the category of being *experience* goods (Bei, Chen and Widdows, 2004). Senecal and Nantel (2004) suggest that consumers who had previously consulted a product recommendation were more likely to purchase that product than those who did not. However, in the absence of recommendations, consumers looking to purchase conducted even more searches for information (Smith, Menon & Sivakumar, 2005). Consumers were more influenced by recommendations associated with an experience product (for example, wine) than for a search product (e.g. calculator) – hence, it would be expected that this also applied to the tourism area. One of the more recent sources of online information for consumers is user-generated content (UGC), where travellers are able to examine text, images, and videos that have been posted online by fellow consumers.

The specific aim of this paper was to capture the perceptions and views of travel consumers that search for information online in relation to the specific benefits and concerns that they might have when dealing with different types of travel recommendations – more particular UGC. Hence, the paper makes a contribution to the existing literature by reporting the perceptions of online travellers and how they view websites that publish information *originating with other users*. A further contribution of the paper is the derivation of a matrix for classifying recommendations associated with online UGC.

## 2 FINDING TRAVEL INFORMATION ONLINE

High credibility is often placed on word-of-mouth (WOM) information as it is believed that the person providing the WOM information has nothing to lose and is therefore more likely to offer honest advice (Chatterjee, 2001). Furthermore, well-reasoned, logical and persuasive reviews can positively influence the likelihood of purchase by people who read them (Park, Lee & Han, 2007). However, when negative word-of-mouth is provided with the specific goal to vent frustration or anger, its influence on the receiver tends to be reduced, as the information is not perceived to be constructive or useful (Wetzer, Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). In a travel sense, consumers often spread WOM due to extreme feelings associated with a product 'experience', such as pleasure or sadness. In some instances, sharing the pleasure of the travel experience is seen as being part of the positive experience (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). Amongst the vast array of information sources consumers can turn to when planning travel, word-of-mouth is one of the most influential. Prospective travellers often rely heavily on advice from friends, family and other peer groups, particularly when planning travel to a destination not previously visited (Litvin et al., 2008). Research indicates that, due to the lack of commercial self-interest associated with WOM recommendations consumers tend to trust and be more influenced by this type of information than by more commercial sources such as travel agents or accommodation operators. This is because the provider of the information is not generally aiming to make a financial gain from sharing their experiences and views with others (Litvin et al., 2008). One of the aims of this article is to examine whether these circumstances translate to the online environment.

## 2.1 Recommendations in the Online Environment

In the online world, recommendations sources can come from other consumers, human experts or expert systems (that will recommend a particular product or service based upon a consumer's profile – and are often known as *recommender systems*) (Senecal and Nantel, 2004). Consumers can use the Internet to mimic sources of information that they would have traditionally received from 'real world' sources. Some examples include (Peterson and Merino 2003; Litvin et al.,2008):

- Visiting websites to access information, instead relying on the traditional mass media advertising and/or information normally acquired from a salesperson
- eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) instead of traditional WOM
- Accessing online independent sources (such as government tourism bodies) instead of their offline counterparts.
- Email- allowing the receipt of subscribed newsletters or as a communication form that facilitates globally correspondence and information exchanges

These days, many websites allow consumers to add their own content in the form of general text comments (weblogs or 'blogs'), travel reviews, pictures and/or video. This content is known as User Generated Content (UGC). UGC sites can equate to electronic WOM marketing, whereby somebody who has an opinion about a product or service shares their views, beliefs and experiences with other people (Ahuja, Michels, Walker & Weissbuch, 2007). Fernando (2007) suggests that UGC is the opposite to traditional forms of media and marketing since content is generated by the consumer rather than by the marketer. Tools such as blogs and social networking sites (such as Facebook) have meant that consumers are better informed than ever before – not only being able to add their own comments, but also being able to find other information and articles and 'tag' them with their own keywords for search purposes (Buhler, 2006). Social networking sites typically operate by inviting people to join and contribute to a network. As this process snowballs the networks can grow. These communities rely upon UGC for their ongoing operation (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2008). Dwyer (2007) suggests that websites containing these new media (such as message boards, chat rooms and now blogs) provide two types of networks – social networks and informational networks. In this article the authors adopt the more general view of UGC, that it can provide a means of social interaction for users but it is also an important source of information.

In the online context, eWOM occurs when consumers create their own information on the Internet to share their experiences and views about products they have purchased (Park et al.,2007). There is typically far more information available to the consumer in the online environment from eWOM than from traditional WOM (Chatterjee, 2001). Park et al.(2007) found that the purchasing intentions of consumers increased in line with the number of reviews that indicated that the product or service was popular.

The provision of forums that capture consumer comments potentially allow a business to receive genuine feedback on their products or services. It also provides them with another avenue in which to provide their own feedback and/or reassurance to those customers. However, there are also a number of forums that are not sponsored by businesses – such as general social networking websites like Facebook. These forums do not always attract comments from 'typical' consumers – in fact, as with traditional WOM, it is more likely that consumers who have had extreme (*very favourable* or *very unfavourable*) experiences are more likely to provide online comments or reviews. However, these sites could be regarded as being more neutral than those sites sponsored by businesses (Litvin et al.,2008).

In the tourism context, the Internet is an important source of information for travellers. For instance, a majority of US travellers use the medium to search for travel information (Litvin et al.,2008). As with other forms of online information, UGC related to travel can be posted on specific travel-related websites or on more generic social networking websites. This content reflects the experiences of the tourist at specific destinations (Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts 2007) or with other travel products.

## 2.2 Trustworthiness of user-generated content

There is no universally accepted definition of 'trust'. Chen (2006) discusses two schools of trust. The first school regards trust as a belief or expectation about another party's trustworthiness. The other school regards trust as a behaviour that reflects a reliance on others and some uncertainty (and vulnerability) from the person who is 'doing the trusting'. The difference is in how trust is actually measured in a research context. Chen (2006) adopts the latter view of trust and identifies three dimensions of trust: the level of competence, the level of benevolence and the level of integrity. However, this view generally relates to the relationship between the consumer and provider – so in this instance, where we are examining the trustworthiness of UGC – it is more appropriate to adopt the first school, where we consider the trustworthiness of the party providing the UGC comment.

Criticism regarding the power of UGC to persuade travelers about travel related decisions is based on the potential for 'fake' content to be posted by travel operators posing as independent reviewers. This effectively defeats the purpose of enabling UGC to influence travelers in their decision making process as the content added is no longer independent, objective or credible (Bray & Schetzina, 2006). One of the concerns raised about the use of UGC sites when planning travel is how the consumer can be assured that the reviews they are viewing are in fact independent and hence trustworthy (Gretzel, 2006). One of the major concerns here is that businesses might use employees to 'act' as consumers to post positive comments on behalf of the business or to post negative comments about the competition (Litvin et al., 2008). Senecal and Nantel (2004) note that many consumers are sceptical about any form of communication that is perceived to be skewed towards the interests of the source of the information. Park et al. (2007) suggest that online consumer reviews are often considered more trustworthy and credible than information provided by suppliers of products and services, assumedly because consumers are considered to provide more honest information. Websites that are independent, third-party type sites tend to be considered more preferable by consumers when compared to those that are clearly operated by a business with a vested interest (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Thus, the forum in which recommendations are presented is quite important. A possible downside of UGC, is that while traditional forms of WOM tends to come from people who are known to the consumer (i.e. friends, colleagues etc), online reviews are typically passed on by total strangers, resulting in some concern over the credibility of the source of review (Park et al., 2007, Litvin et al., 2008).

Table 1 provides a summary of the potential benefits and concerns of consumers in relation to online recommendations as identified in the literature. These are divided into three major categories; those that relate to the content of the recommendation, the source of the recommendations, and the nature in which recommendations might be encountered in the online environment. Obviously, these categories are linked (for instance, where commercial sources are seen to post fake content to bias the behaviour of potential travellers). The *Content* category relates to extreme or emotional postings versus well-argued postings and the possibility of fake content. The *Source* category relates to the notion that eWOM provides more recommendation sources and the credibility levels of independent and consumer recommendations versus those of businesses with vested interests and comments posted on social networking sites. The nature of recommendations refers to their influence due to the nature of tourism as a product and the ability of tourists to filter the wealth of information available online. The categories are groupings which have emerged from the literature and should be viewed as a starting point for this type of classification.

What we find most interesting here is that there seem to be real contrasts in relation to views about UGC content. For instance, it can be viewed as being 'credible' or 'not credible' as a source and there are both benefits and concerns about the content that is posted. This reflects the different opinions that users, and even contributors, have depending upon their different views and experiences. In a study of the content of travel blogs, Pan et al (2007) divided a number of blog comments into 'positive' and 'negative' statements and found that there were both types of sentences across most of the categories (the ones with the most comments being attractions, amenities, history, food and beverages and natural

environment). In most cases the number of positive comments outweighed the number of negative comments (overall there were around three positive comments for every negative comment).

Category		Benefits	Concerns
Content	Argument; extreme opinions	Well-reasoned, logical, persuasive reviews can positively influence purchase decisions (Park et al.,2007)	Not useful when venting frustration or anger (Wetzer, et al.,2007); Those with very positive or very negative views tend to post comments (Litvin et al.,2008)
	Fake content		Posted by travel operators (Bray & Schetzina, 2006).
Source	eWOM and 'weak' ties	Sources more plentiful (Duhall et al.,1997; Chatterjee, 2001); Access to more reviews than with WOM (Park et al.,2007)	Source not known to the consumer (Duhall et al.,1997)
	Credibility	Credible as source as nothing to lose by offering advice (Chatterjee, 2001; Litvin et al.,2008); Consumers and independent bodies can be neutral source (Bei et al.,2004; Park et al.,2007)	Businesses may appear to have vested interest (Litvin et al.,2008); Content of social networking sites is not as trustworthy as that of corporate websites (Wasserman, 2006)
Nature of Recommendations	Influence	More likely to influence as tourism is an 'experience' product (Senecal and Nantel, 2004)	
	Filter	Can assist tourists to manage the wealth of data (Smith et al.,2005)	

*Table 1: Benefits and Concerns of Online Travel Recommendations*

### 3 THE STUDY

In this study we are predominantly interested in the views of consumers that use the Internet to assist with travel plans in relation to their opinions about UGC. However, linked with this is the idea that they need to place their use of UGC in context with other travel information and services that are available to them online. Thus, our more general research question relates to whether the benefits and concerns of online travel recommendations (as identified in Table 1), translate specifically to the use of UGC for travel purposes. In particular we will be looking to see if the benefits (in relation to well-reasoned reviews, plentiful sources of information and credibility) and concerns (such as extreme opinions, fake content, unknown sources and low credibility) actually do exist.

To explore consumers' views on UGC in relation to travel planning, a quantitative study was conducted using an online survey of consumers who were known to use the Internet to gather information when planning their travel. The survey was developed based on a review of existing studies, as outlined in the previous section. It contained four key sections, the first of which gauged participants' previous exposure to sites containing UGC related to travel. Section 2 assessed the influence of UGC sites on participants' actual travel planning and trip behaviour. This section included two open ended questions that asked respondents to express what they liked about UGC postings regarding travel as well as any concerns they had about this type of information. Section 3 gauged the types of UGC considered most useful along with opinions about how UGC should be used

by hospitality and tourism providers in conjunction with their existing online marketing strategies. The final section asked for the demographic characteristics of participants.

Following a pilot test of the instrument with a sample of real travelers, the final survey was conducted online in December 2007. A web-link to the survey was included in an invitation, sent via email, to participate in the research promoted through Tourism New South Wales's database of email subscribers known as E-Scapes. At the time of dispatching the email invitation to promote the survey, there were approximately 110,000 subscribers listed on the database. An incentive prize was included with the email received by subscribers to encourage responses. Recipients of the email who chose to participate in the survey, on a voluntary and anonymous basis, simply clicked on the web-link provided and responded to the survey questions online.

Data was collected over a two-week period and the survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. All data received was contained within a downloadable spreadsheet from the survey software that was then converted into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for further analysis.

By the survey closing date, 13,281 people had participated in the study. This represents a response rate of approximately 12 percent. It should be noted that not all respondents answered every question in the survey, as they were given the option not to answer questions if they so chose. Furthermore, some questions were not asked of all respondents (e.g., names of UGC sites they had used) where their previous responses to questions indicated a question was irrelevant. A typical example of this is where respondents were asked a series of questions related to their opinions of UGC. These questions were only shown to respondents that had indicated they had used UGC websites. These factors should be taken into account when noting the total number of responses reported in the various tables in this section. Approximately 700 responses were not considered useful due to a lack of data, so in effect the useable number of responses was 12,544. The survey contained many questions and 64% of those who commenced the survey actually completed it.

### 3.1 Respondent Profile

A demographic profile of survey participants is provided in Table 2. The questions related to age, gender, country of origin, place of origin and income level were asked towards the end of the survey. The number of respondents that completed these questions (around two thirds of usable responses) closely matches the overall completion rate of the survey as indicated in the previous section (64%). This profile is compared to that of the database of 110,000 users, provided by Tourism New South Wales, from which the respondents were obtained (see last column of table) to enable any potential response bias to be detected. Overall the sample surveyed is highly representative of the profile of users included in the database.

The age profile of participants in this study reflects the overall profile of the E-Scapes database. Approximately 51 percent of people were aged 30-49 years. A further 23 percent were 50-59 years. In terms of gender, the skew towards a higher proportion of female participants (61%) is reflective of the overall profile of the database. The profile of responses to the survey appears, therefore, to be able to be generalized to the population of travelers included in the database.

### 3.2 Benefits of and Concerns with UGC

In order to ensure a consistent meaning for UGC, respondents were presented with the following description at the beginning of the survey:

*A growing number of web sites are incorporating features which enable the user, such as you, to contribute their own content enabling people to communicate about special interest topics or products or services through the Internet. Such content is commonly referred to as 'user-generated content'.*

*In relation to travel and tourism, some examples of user-generated content include:*

- *ordinary people like yourself sharing their opinions about travel destinations, attractions and accommodation properties through blogs (weblogs) or other discussion forums*
- *travellers submitting photos or videos to the internet to share their travel experiences with other online users (including family, friends or total strangers who may be interested)*
- *consumers posting reviews of accommodation properties to sites such as tripadvisor.com*
- *people using social networking sites such as myspace.com, facebook.com or youtube.com to share travel information.*

Respondents were asked if they had visited any Internet sites that had contained UGC (5,724 indicated that they had). To understand the issues that were of potential concern to travellers, the survey asked these respondents two open-ended questions:

- ‘What do you like about sites that contain user-generated content related to travel?’
- ‘In relation to making travel plans, is there anything about UGC that concerns you?’

Thus, these questions related to the opinions of users about websites with UGC content and did not involve any analysis of UGC content itself, such as those carried out by Dwyer (2007) and Pan et al (2007). A total of 2,546 respondents (44% of those that had visited websites with UGC) listed ‘likes’ about UGC content and 1,238 (22%) respondents indicated they held some concerns about UGC. This may relate to Pan et al’s (2007) study which found that positive comments within a blog outweighed the number of negative comments. The responses received to these questions were analysed in the qualitative software package XSight, which enables comments to be classified under key headings that reflect particular ‘likes’ and ‘concerns’ which arose.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% responded</b>	<b>% of database</b>
Age Group	Under 19 years	39	0.5	0.2
	20-29 years	893	10.0	10.6
	30-34 years	972	11.4	12.1
	35-39 years	1091	12.7	13.3
	40-44 years	1155	13.5	13.9
	45-49 years	1161	13.6	14.3
	50-54 years	1103	12.9	13.0
	55-59 years	874	10.2	10.2
	60-69 years	1056	12.3	10.7
	70 plus years	223	2.6	1.8
	<i>Total</i>		8567	100.0
Gender	Female	5235	61.4	60
	Male	3292	38.6	40
	<i>Total</i>	8527	100.0	100.0
Country of Origin	Australia	8273	97.0	99.0
	Other	259	3.0	1.0
	<i>Total</i>	8532	100.0	100.0
Place of Origin	New South Wales	6210	72.8	68.1
	Victoria	934	10.9	8.2
	Queensland	713	8.4	7.6
	Other States	362	4.2	14.5
	Overseas	259	3.0	1.6
	Australia – not stated	54	0.7	-
	<i>Total</i>	8532	100.0	100.0
Gross Household Income/Year	Less than \$52,000	2178	27.4	28.8
	\$52,000 - \$77,999	1738	21.8	24.5
	More than \$78,000	4041	50.8	46.7
	<i>Total</i>	7957	100.0	100.0

Table 2: Profile of Survey Respondents

## 4 RESULTS

### 4.1 Benefits of UGC sites

Respondents to the survey were asked (in separate questions) to identify their ‘likes’ and ‘concerns’ in relation to UGC websites. The answers to these questions provided the authors with an opportunity to match these responses with the benefits and concerns of online travel recommendations as listed in the literature (and summarised in Table 1). As mentioned earlier, the ‘likes’ and ‘concerns’ were classified according to various headings and subheadings. Table 3 shows the ‘likes’ classified into their main heading groups.

Likes	Frequency	Percent
Trust in the source	1048	41
Traveller opinions	396	15
Relevance to user	225	9
Recommendations	155	6
Amount of information	137	5
General comments	124	5
Ease of use / speed	121	5
Specific comments	106	4
Other	85	3
Don't like / unsure	68	3
Currency	64	3
Share experiences	17	1
Total	2546	100

Table 3: Classification of 'Likes' in relation to UGC websites

Many of the comments that were made fitted across a number of categories list in Table 3. Where this occurred the comment was classified according to its primary emphasis, or the first occurrence of the classification in the comment. The main classification of comments occurred as follows:

- *Trust in the Source*: a number of different types of comments were classified under this heading. Typically, comments that highlighted the ‘credibility’, ‘accuracy’ or ‘authenticity’ of UGC content and the ‘balanced’ nature of UGC fitted into this category. In addition, comments that related to the type of person making UGC comments fitted here, such as UGC was generated by ‘real people’, ‘independent people’ or ‘everyday people’. Finally, there were comments that related to the authenticity of the experience of the people posting comments – they had ‘been there, done that’, they were ‘genuine experiences’ and so forth. Comments in this section were also highlighted by words such as ‘honest’, ‘candid’, ‘frank’, ‘truthful’, ‘unbiased’, ‘unsolicited’ and so forth.
- *Traveller opinions*: these were typified by comments that related to the ‘range’ or ‘variety’ of opinions available in UGC and how they could be ‘compared’. One interesting aspect of this category is that a number of respondents (59) actually suggested that the fact that there were both ‘positive and negative’ comments was a good thing as it allowed for comparisons of experiences.
- *Relevance to user*: comments were classified into this category when respondents indicated that UGC assisted in helping with their ‘own travel plans’, was ‘personalised’ to their interests or was posted by ‘like minded people’. Comments in this latter category were posted by a number of elderly respondents and also those that were looking for travel experiences suitable for families.

- *Recommendations*: these comments involved respondents identifying that UGC content provided specific recommendations for potentially new (sometimes ‘off beat’) experiences, or offered tips, hints or advice on what to do or expect in different situations.
- *Amount of information*: comments in this category referred to the quantity of information available in UGC. These comments were highlighted by words such as ‘comprehensive’, ‘lots’, ‘more’, ‘detailed’ and reference to the ‘large number of opinions’.
- *General comments*: no *specific* comments about UGC were made in this category. These were just comments by respondents that referred to UGC as being generally ‘interesting’, ‘useful’, ‘helpful’, ‘informative’ or just providing ‘information’.
- *Ease and speed of Use*: these comments referred to UGC websites as being ‘user friendly’, ‘easy to use’, ‘accessible’, ‘saving time’ or ‘convenient’.
- *Specific comments*: most of these comments related directly to the use of UGC for booking accommodation or the fact that traveller pictures are posted on UGC websites.
- *Don’t like/ unsure*: Interestingly, 68 respondents chose to use the ‘likes’ of UGC content to say that they did not like UGC websites or that they were unsure what UGC actually is.
- *Currency*: these comments related to UGC content being ‘current’ or ‘up to date’.
- *Share experiences*: a small number of respondents suggested that they liked UGC because they could share their experiences with each other.
- *Other*: these comments did not fit any of the above categories.

Table 4 shows a comparison between the benefits of online travel recommendations that were identified in Table 1 and the results of the UGC study. Overall, most of the benefits that were mentioned in the literature were well-represented in the study, the most evident being comments related to credibility. The only ‘benefit’ that did not stand out in the study was that there were not a lot of comments by respondents that suggested they were persuaded by well-reasoned or logical reviews.

Category		Benefits (Literature)	Our study
Content	Argument; extreme opinions	Well-reasoned, logical, persuasive reviews can positively influence purchase decisions	Not evident in responses
Source	eWOM and ‘weak’ ties	Sources more plentiful; Access to more reviews than with WOM	Traveller opinions (15%); Amount of information (5%)
	Credibility	Credible as source as nothing to lose by offering advice; Consumers/ independent bodies can be a neutral source	Trust in the source (41%)
Nature of Recommendations	Influence	More likely to influence as tourism is an ‘experience’ product	Recommendations (6%)
	Filter	Can assist tourists to manage the wealth of data	Relevance to user (9%); Ease of use/ speed (5%)

Table 4: Comparison of Literature Online Travel Recommendation benefits with ‘likes’ of UGC websites from our study

#### 4.2 Concerns about UGC sites

To understand the issues that were of potential concern to travellers, the survey asked respondents an open-ended question - ‘in relation to making travel plans, is there anything about user-generated content that concerns you?’ A total of 1,238 respondents indicated that held some concerns about UGC. Refer to Table 5 for a summary of these responses. The responses received to this question were also analysed in a qualitative software analysis package (XSight). Table 5 lists the key concerns used to classify respondents’ comments about UGC.

Concern	Frequency	Percent
Trustworthiness/ reliability	599	48
Lack of relevance to user	267	22
Extreme opinion	176	14
Other	132	11
Security/ privacy concerns	64	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>1238</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 5: Classification of 'Likes' in relation to UGC websites

Under the heading of trustworthiness/ reliability the key concern identified by respondents is that UGC sites provide an opportunity for businesses to masquerade as independent travellers and post their own 'fake' entries. The second identified concern related to the extent to which comments made on UGC sites are trustworthy, accurate and credible for reasons other than the potential for business to tamper with UGC. Other respondents noted that it can be difficult to base one's own travel decisions on the types of comments made on UGC sites as other travellers may well have different preferences to their own. Linked to the issue of the identity of travellers, a number of people also noted that it was hard to make a judgement about the value of UGC comments when the profile of the person submitting the information is generally unknown. These comments were classified under the heading of 'Lack of relevance to the user'. Further concerns identified related to the tendency for people to contribute commentary to UGC only when they had very positive or very negative things to say (i.e. UGC can tend to be biased rather than represent the 'average' travellers experience). Some respondents indicated that UGC sites can be used by 'habitual complainers' to vent their negative views without providing a realistic assessment of the overall travel experience. These comments were classified as 'extreme opinions'.

Table 6 shows a comparison between the concerns of online travel recommendations that were identified in the literature (refer Table 1) and the results of the UGC study. As with the 'benefits', a large proportion of the comments related to the trustworthiness or reliability of UGC – in this instance it was being viewed as a concern. Within that category, there were numerous comments related to all of the areas that were identified in the literature – concerns about fake content (28% of all respondents), the source not being known to respondents (4%) and comments related to concerns about the credibility of content (14%). There were also concerns about the usefulness of comments that were classified as 'extreme opinions' – the main problem identified with these was that they were too biased or that the websites were just being used as a 'complaints forum'. There was one issue of concern that emerged from the study that was not evident in the previous literature – the practice of comments being posted that were *not relevant to the user*. In these instances there were concerns that the content was being posted by travellers with different personal preferences, that they were only subjective or personal opinions anyway, or were just out of date. This contrasts the 'benefit' identified (refer Table 4) which suggested that UGC helped tourists manage the wealth of data as it was *relevant* to their needs.

Category		Concerns	Our Study
Content	Argument; extreme opinions	Not useful when venting frustration or anger; Those with very positive or very negative views tend to post comments	Extreme opinion (14%)
	Fake content	Posted by travel operators	
Source	eWOM and 'weak' ties	Source not known to the consumer	Trustworthiness/ reliability (48%)
	Credibility	Businesses may appear to have vested interest; Content of social networking sites is not as trustworthy as that of corporate websites	
Nature of recommendations	Influence	Not evident in literature	Not evident in study
	Filter	Not evident in literature	Lack of relevance to user (22%)

Table 6: Comparison of Literature Online Travel Recommendation concerns with 'concerns' of UGC websites from our study

#### 4.3 Summary

The literature highlighted a series of 'paradoxes' in relation to the benefits and concerns associated with online travel recommendations. This study was able to match and in some instances further enhance the findings from the previous literature. The paradox appears to be that for just about every benefit ('like') that is identified by survey respondents there is a matching 'concern' that is also identified. In fact, the study revealed that a number of respondents mentioned 'extreme opinions' as being a 'like' of UGC, whilst it was mentioned by others as being a concern. Of course, many respondents mentioned the credibility of UGC as being a benefit, whilst it was also mentioned as being a concern. Respondents also referred to UGC content being 'relevant' as a benefit, whilst others suggested that a concern was that it was not relevant to them.

The reader is referred to Table 7. Of the 1238 respondents that had listed a concern about UGC, 1179 (95%) also listed a 'like' about UGC. In fact, of the 1179 respondents that listed both a 'like' for and a 'concern' about UGC content:

- 274 suggested a 'like' related being able to 'trust the source' **as well as** a concern about the 'trustworthiness/ reliability' of the source in the same response! In both instances ('likes' and 'concerns'), the proportion of respondents that fitted into this category was higher than the proportion of general respondents that identified trust as only a like or concern. Whilst this seems quite strange, the range of comments that were made in this category for both 'likes' and 'concerns' makes it quite feasible. For instance, here are some examples of responses:
  - Like: real photographs; real experiences; Concern: fake content
  - Like: frankness of comments; Concern: commercial interest posting comments
  - Like: honesty of comments of travellers; Concern: comments might be 'made up' by businesses
- 28 respondents suggested that they 'liked' traveller opinions on UGC, but had concerns about the validity of extreme opinions.
- 16 respondents that suggested in the UGC benefits that the information in UGC was relevant for them also suggested in the concerns that it could also *not* be relevant!

Likes	Concerns					
	Trustworthiness/ reliability	Lack of relevance to user	Extreme opinion	Security/ privacy concerns	Other	Total
Trust in the source	274	125	80	6	40	525
Traveller opinions	96	40	28	3	24	191
Relevance to user	45	16	9	9	9	88
Recommendations	31	16	12	5	4	68
Amount of information	21	14	10	5	7	57
Specific comments	23	9	5	7	11	55
General comments	19	8	6	4	5	42
Ease of use / speed	12	8	2	12	5	39
Currency	17	7	6	1	4	35
Don't like / unsure	16	6	5	2	6	35
Share experiences	3	3	1	0	2	9
Other	12	7	3	4	9	35
<b>Total</b>	<b>569</b>	<b>259</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>1179</b>

Table 7: 'Likes' of and 'Concerns' about UGC content by respondents that expressed both

## 5 CONCLUSION

This study suggests that there are still many questions to be answered about the role of UGC. The literature highlighted a number of areas that were seen as strengths and concerns in the use of UGC to support the travel purchase decisions of consumers. The results of the study suggest that the most notable of these is the level of trustworthiness and reliability that can be associated with the postings – they can be trusted because they are real experiences by real people who are independent – but can also be seen as untrustworthy because the content that is posted may be faked by someone with a vested interest. Similar paradoxes exist in relation to the range of traveler opinions available (a benefit) versus the extremity of opinions that can be posted (a concern) and whether or not the content can be specifically applied to a traveller's own situation (where those that thought it could be applied saw it as a benefit and those that thought it could not be applied viewed it as a concern). For the most part, the results of the study tended to reiterate the benefits and concerns that were highlighted in the literature. It is envisaged that until there can be improvements made in determining the reliability of the source of UGC, less use of UGC for postings involving extreme opinions and the provision of improved filtering capabilities for travelers to identify information that is relevant to their needs that these paradoxes will remain.

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