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TITLE: Social Media in the Hospitality Industry: An empirical study on how hotel managers deal with user-generated content

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## Foreword

This thesis was written in order to gain insight into the way hotel managers deal with social media and user-generated content. The process of writing this Master's Thesis has been both a fascinating and challenging journey for us as researchers. We have received a lot of support and helpful advice during this process and would like to express our gratitude to the following people: Firstly and most importantly, we would like to thank our supervisor, Professor Jens Kristian Steen Jacobsen, for his valuable advice and guidance throughout the whole process of writing this thesis. *We could not have done it without you.* Secondly, we wish to thank the administration and professors of the Norwegian Hotel School (NHS) for supporting our work and making this process an interesting experience. Thirdly, we also want to thank the participating hotel managers for their precious time and for sharing valuable information with us; it is after all the foundation of this research. Finally, we would like to thank our families, friends and classmates for their endless support and for putting up with us through these months.

## Abstract

Social media has gained in importance in the last years. With the revolution of the World Wide Web from simple tool to complex platform, user-generated content and online customer reviews have had a great impact on both consumers and businesses. This study explores the ways hotel managers deal with social media and user-generated content. Qualitative methods are employed through the analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with hotel managers in the Stavanger region in Norway. The research provides empirical evidence of the ways hotel managers make use of social media and user-generated content in their operations. Special emphasis is placed on analysing the strategic implementation of social media into the current operations and the future planning processes of the hotels in question. The findings of the study indicate that hotel managers consider social media and user-generated content important, but little effort and few resources are employed. In addition, there is a significant lack of knowledge of social media practices and explicit strategies are scarce. Yet, managers see social media as an opportunity rather than a threat and believe it to gain importance in the future.

## **Keywords**

Social media, user-generated content, Web 2.0, electronic word-of-mouth, hospitality management, strategy

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## **Introduction**

In countries like Norway, the Internet is a common tool in the majority of households. Haven't we all searched for destinations, attractions and hotels before planning our next holidays, and haven't we all read multiple reviews before choosing a place to travel to, a place that meets our expectations? Some information has been unhelpful and inaccurate, but the majority of reviews have given us a rather realistic picture of the chosen area and place, haven't they? In 2005, TripAdvisor's number of reviews was said to be 1,926,031 (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). Eight years later, in 2013, TripAdvisor claims to have more than 100 million registered travel reviews (TripAdvisor, 2013), which is 52 times as much. There is no denying that online customer opinions are a part of the hospitality and tourism industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we have therefore chosen to make it an important compound of our research.

In this study, we examine how management relates to social media and online user-generated content, and whether specific strategies on how to manage online user-generated content are implemented into the strategic planning process of the venue. Special attention is given to the way online reviews on third-party websites are dealt with. We choose to investigate this topic since the Internet has become increasingly important in today's society. Service companies use the World Wide Web to market and sell their products and services, and consumers can purchase services online to a greater extent than ever before. Amersdorffer (2010) talks about a change in communication on the Internet, from the classic Internet (Web 1.0) to more complex Web 2.0 and, therefore, transition from the conventional sender-receiver hierarchy towards a many-to-many communication. As a result, the new social dimension in the Internet has enabled new features such as social media, user-generated content and electronic word-of-mouth.

It is especially important that companies realise how potential customers nowadays easily compare products and services online before making decisions. In other words, customers can make informed decisions by analysing other customers' opinions that were previously posted online (Litvin et al., 2008). Hotel managers should make use of online reviews, particularly if they are being posted on third-party websites (Ye, Law & Gu, 2009). According to McConnell & Huba (2007), online reviews are critical as word-of-mouth is the most trusted source of information for service customers. Black & Kelley (2009) emphasise the fact that online technology continues to grow and that hotel managers and marketers therefore need to acquire a solid understanding of the view customers have on this technology. Nate Bucholz of Google informed reporters that 69% of businesses and 63% of consumers search the Internet when planning travel. In average, these businesses visit 22 sites before they decide on a destination. According to him, the Internet is the primary medium for businesses choosing destinations, overtaking word-of-mouth in importance (European Travel Commission, 2013). When it comes to Norway, the use of the Internet is also part of the daily lives of the population. According to Statistics Norway, the Internet is used by almost everyone in the age groups younger than 65 years and an increase has come in the older age groups (Statistics Norway, 2012). When it comes to the use of social media, Statistics Norway states that the share of the Norwegian population that has taken part in electronic social networks during the last three months has increased from 59 to 63 per cent.

Even though various articles deal with user-generated content and social media, little is known on how managers deal with these new networking opportunities. Park & Allen (2012) stress that "we have yet to find any major, peer-reviewed research on firms' online review responses" (p. 65). Consequently, there is a research gap when it comes to user-generated content and the way hotel managers make use of it. Even though numerous articles deal with the topic of social media and online customer feedback, there are very few authors



that conduct specific research or go deeper into the matter of how user-generated content is managed. Frequently, research on user-generated content and social media relates to how and why consumers post and who the posting consumer actually is. For example, Bronner & de Hoog (2011) conducted a study in order to find out which type of vacationers post reviews, what kind of motivations these travellers have, which types of sites they use for posting and what kind of characteristics the review messages have. Furthermore, Yoo & Gretzel (2011) researched how personality influences motivations and behaviours in relation to the creation of travel-related user-generated content. Previous research on tourists' online travel information search can also be found; Xiang & Gretzel (2010) talk about the growing importance of social media for travel-related search, whereas Jacobsen & Munar (2012) highlight the complementary nature of the 'old' Web 1.0 and 'new' Web 2.0.

Amersdorffer (2010) stresses that destination management organisations have to become part of the customers' communication network, by applying social web specific communication and networking procedures. Litvin & Hoffman (2012) conclude from the findings of their study that investing into the management of hotel review sites should be seen as an opportunity, as the time and effort used often leads to good chances of rewards. Nevertheless, O'Connor's study of 100 hotels in London showed that less than 0,5% of the analysed reviews included a management response (O'Connor, 2010). As previous research shows the importance of interactive Web 2.0 features and the lack of their implementation into businesses' planning processes, we seek to analyse the following points in our study. Firstly, our research aims at analysing hotel managers' opinions on social media, online review sites and user-generated content practices. Secondly, we try to determine management behaviour in this field. Thirdly and most importantly, this research is carried out in order to find out how hotel managers implement social media and user-generated content practices in the strategic planning processes and operations of their venues.

The importance and indispensability of social media and user-generated content in the hospitality and tourism industry is evident, but this research field is rather novel. Therefore, we are hoping to contribute to the topic by providing a deeper insight to the current issues, and generating new knowledge especially on the management perspective. We hope to add to the existing literature by finding an answer to our research problem: *How do hotel managers in the Stavanger region handle social media and user-generated content?*

The following research questions and objectives are designed to generate knowledge and to find an answer to the research problem:

### **Research questions**

- Which social media channels do hotel managers use?
- How important do hotel managers consider social media and user-generated content to be?
- How are social media and user-generated content integrated into the hotel operations?
- How are social media and user-generated content implemented into the future planning process of the hotel?

### **Research objectives**

- To determine the social media channels that hotel managers use in order to monitor online feedback from customers
- To determine how important hotel managers consider social media and user-generated content to be.
- To determine how social media and user-generated content are integrated into the hotel operations

- To determine how social media and user-generated content are implemented into the future planning process of the hotel

Our research questions and objectives are characterised by novelty and aim at better understanding the role social media and user-generated content have in the hospitality industry. Therefore, in order to find answers to our research problem, we choose to use qualitative methodology. We believe that examining the perspectives of hotel managers will provide us with new knowledge and a deeper insight into the matter. Hence, we decide to conduct in-depth interviews with hotel managers in the Stavanger region. Stavanger is described as Norway's oil capital. Even though the town has a significant amount of leisure travellers, business travellers are the most important segment for the majority of hotels, as large oil companies such as Statoil, Total, ConocoPhillips and Shell have their headquarters in Stavanger. Naturally, the trend in the Stavanger region goes towards business hotels with conference facilities. Altogether, eleven interviews with both individual and chain hotel managers will be conducted in order to provide us with an adequate amount of qualitative data.

This study will first give a theoretical overview of the topic by introducing central terms and their definitions, key concepts and previous research. The concepts of Web 2.0, social media, electronic word-of-mouth and user-generated content constitute the framework for this study. These concepts will particularly be discussed in the light of strategies and management issues. The theoretical background will be followed by the research methodology. The chapter will cover our choice of methods and reasons for using them, and describe the stages of data collection and analysis. A discussion on reliability and validity will follow. Furthermore, the results will be presented and the main findings will be addressed in

the discussion chapter. Lastly, a conclusion and future suggestions will be shown up, also analysing limitations to the study.

### **Theoretical background**

Information and communication technologies have radically changed the tourism industry, and the way businesses and organisations manage the process of producing, delivering and selling their products (Buhalis & Law, 2008). In addition, travellers rely heavily upon the Internet when buying tourism products and services, or searching for travel-related information (Buhalis, 1998; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). This clearly creates both opportunities and challenges for the hospitality and tourism industry.

Especially the interactive and social Web 2.0 has introduced new perspectives for tourism and hospitality organisations and marketers alike. Compared to many traditional channels, it provides flexibility, speed of sharing and the possibility of efficient searching of information. Nowadays, Web 2.0 tools are widely used by travellers to search travel-related information, but also to share their travel experiences (Munar, 2011). In fact, it has been estimated that social network sites influence consumers as much as television and more than newspapers (Amis, 2007). Thus, the Web 2.0 and social media can be considered a significant part of the marketplace today.

As virtual communities and social media are becoming increasingly important when developing and managing information, the locus of control of the information creation process is shifting, too (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Traditionally, organisations and marketers have dictated web content, but now the consumer is in control (O'Connor, 2010). This also means that the guest experience is becoming more transparent, and reviews can potentially influence the decision making of the traveller (O'Connor, 2010). In addition, consumers tend to trust electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as an unbiased and relevant source of information in their decision making process (Sweeney, Soutar & Mazzarol, 2008). This is particularly true in the

hospitality industry, where products are highly intangible, as they cannot be tested before the purchase, and thus are high-risk products (Litvin et al., 2008). This highlights the importance of interpersonal influence, as online reviews by other travellers are likely to reduce the pre-purchase uncertainty and add to the overall image of the hotel (Litvin et al., 2008). Studies also show that traveller reviews have a significant impact on online sales. For example, an empirical study of Ye et al. (2009) confirms that online user reviews have an impact on online bookings and room sales, also highlighting the importance of eWOM for hospitality businesses. In addition, it is notable that travellers regard online reviews to be particularly relevant for hotels rather than for other travel products (Gretzel, Yoo & Purifoy, 2007). Therefore, it is apparent that hotel managers should consider online reviews in a serious manner and try to manage them effectively.

The theoretical overview section of this paper will show up views on user-generated media, depicted by previous literature. Furthermore, phenomena and terms will be defined in order to give meaning to the discussion and results presented later in this study.

## **Web 2.0**

The Internet has undergone significant changes and is a highly relevant tool for both companies and customers. Especially in the last decade, new forms of communication on different platforms and sites have become pertinent for the tourism and hospitality industry.

The “simple” Web 1.0 has developed into the “complex” Web 2.0. O’Reilly (2005) believes that the Web 2.0 is a set of practices and principles that connects different sites. The Web 2.0 has a gravitational core rather than a hard boundary. “Network effects from user contributions are the key to market dominance in the Web 2.0 era” (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 2). With this statement, O’Reilly points out the importance of user-generated content. Collective intelligence includes “hyperlinking” (O’Reilly, 2005), which implies that new content and sites, which are added by some users, are attached to the structure by other users linking to

them. Collective activity makes the web of connections grow. Yahoo!, Google and eBay are examples of companies that acknowledge the importance and successfully use link structure and user activity to gain importance and traffic on the World Wide Web. Furthermore, Internet era software is not delivered as a product, but as a service. Operations must therefore become a core competency in the business model of companies. Furthermore, users should be treated as co-developers as open source development practices become more common and acknowledged. “Native Web 2.0 companies enjoy a natural advantage, as they don't have old patterns (and corresponding business models and revenue sources) to shed” (O'Reilly, 2005, p. 4). In other words, companies that appreciate and integrate user-generated content in their service development are more competitive than traditional Web 1.0 companies. O'Reilly (2005) believes that “Web 2.0 will provide opportunities for companies to beat the competition by getting better at harnessing and integrating services provided by others” (p. 4).

Web 2.0 is no longer limited to the PC platform and to single devices. In 2005, O'Reilly predicted that this area of Web 2.0 is most likely to see the greatest change, as an increasing amount of devices is being connected to the new platform. Today, we can confirm this statement, with smartphones, iPads and other mini computers being developed and technology being amended every day. Conclusively, user interface innovation is a key-term. Local PC-based applications used to outmatch web applications. Web 2.0 has finally equalized the possibilities between the two types of applications. Lightweight applications and applications that learn from their users are significant for the Web 2.0 era (O'Reilly, 2005). The volume and extent of the shared data leads to richer user experiences than ever before.

We can see that the WWW has changed significantly, from the black and white Web 1.0 with limited user opportunities, to the colourful and fertile Web 2.0 offering rich features and almost unlimited possibilities for its users. Thus, it can be noted that Web 2.0 is an

essential element in the online world, enabling social media, electronic-word-of-mouth and user-generated content.

### **User-generated content**

User-generated content (UGC) or consumer-generated media (CGM) can be seen as a new form of word-of-mouth which takes place in new social circles of consumers and beyond their traditional communication channels (Gretzel, Kang & Lee, 2008). Nowadays, user-generated content takes place on many different levels and platforms, and is referred to as "the wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki, 2004). This expression can refer to online encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia and supports the belief that online entries become "more comprehensive, more relevant, and more current than those found in static paper publications" (O'Connor, 2010, p.757). Yoo & Gretzel (2010) refer to user-generated content as a new form of word-of-mouth that provides "non-commercial, detailed, experiential and up-to-date information [...] beyond one's immediate social circle" (Yoo & Gretzel, 2010, p. 610).

Despite the amount of existing literature on user-generated content, there is no commonly acknowledged definition. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2007) defines the term by highlighting three central aspects of user-generated content:

1. It needs to be *published* on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site only accessible to a selected group of people.
2. A certain amount of *creative effort* must have been put into creating or adapting existing work, meaning that users add their own value to it.
3. It needs to be *created outside of professional routines and practices*, indicating that it is not been created in an institutional or commercial context.

Based on these requirements, user-generated content excludes for example emails and instant messaging, as well as merely copying someone else's work and posting it without any modifications or comments.

### **Social media – A short overview**

To be able to understand the context and the results of this study, it is also necessary to clarify the concept of social media as. As the terminology in this field has been adopted recently, and as it is derived from the quickly changing technological industry, it is common that especially in everyday language terms such as Web 2.0, user-generated content and social media get easily confused with each other. For example, Web 2.0 is sometimes used as a synonym for social media, which it is actually not. There is no established definition of the term *social media*, but it is often characterised by the creation and sharing of online content and interactive communication. Zarrella (2010) emphasises social media's distinction from traditional media, such as television and newspapers, by its empowerment of creating and distributing content. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) explain the term with respect to concepts of Web 2.0 and user-generated content. They state that Web 2.0 can be seen as the ideological and technological foundation for the evolution of social media, while user-generated content represents all the ways in which social media is used by people. Considering both of these aspects, Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) define social media as "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" (p.61).

Zarrella (2010) classifies the most popular types of social media sites under eight categories: (1) blogs (e.g. Travel Blog), (2) microblogs, (e.g. Twitter), (3) social networks (e.g. Facebook), (4) media-sharing sites (e.g. YouTube), (5) social bookmarking sites (e.g. StumbleUpon), (6) review sites (e.g. TripAdvisor), (7) forums (e.g. Thorn Tree by Lonely Planet), and (8) virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life). The variety of different kinds of social



media platforms shows that there is an enormous amount of user-generated content on the Internet, ready to be used. We are now going to have a brief look at some of the different types of social media that we consider the most relevant for our study. These are blogs, microblogs, social networks, media-sharing sites and review sites.

**Blogs.** Blogs represent one of the oldest forms of social media. The term stems from a word ‘web log’, and means “personal websites that are frequently updated with new entries and are displayed in reverse chronological order” (Waldhör & Rind, 2008, p. 454). Blogger and WordPress are among the most popular blogging platforms. WordPress alone has 67,016,384 registered blogs today, and each month over 380 million people view more than 4.1 billion pages (WordPress, 2013).

**Microblogs.** Sites such as Tumblr and Twitter are called microblogs as they provide platforms for short-form blogging, even though the core idea is the same as with blogs in general. For example, on Twitter private users and companies can post bursts of information of up to 140 characters length, called “tweets”, which can then be followed by other users (Twitter, 2013). Zarrella (2010) recommends that companies use Twitter, because it is easy, not very time consuming and can quickly create buzz around their products.

**Social networking sites.** Facebook, MySpace, Google+, WAYN (Where Are You Now), and numerous other social networking sites are popular among people today. Social networking sites provide a platform, especially for individuals to stay connected with friends, share and express their opinions. With respect to the number of users, Facebook is undoubtedly the most popular of the social networking sites today. In March 2013, Facebook had an average 655 million daily active users and 1.11 billion monthly active users could be found on the site (Facebook, 2013a). No wonder that businesses have become increasingly interested in this form of social media, too. The increase in revenue from advertising can

reflect this. For the first quarter of this year, 85% of the total revenue of Facebook came from advertising (\$1.25 billion), a 43% increase from the same quarter last year (Facebook, 2013b).

**Media-sharing sites.** Media-sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr allow users to upload videos, photos and other multimedia content on the site for others to see. YouTube is an online platform that enables users to upload and stream video content. According to their statistics online, there are more than 1 billion users that visit the site every month and over 4 billion hours of video are watched every month (YouTube, n.d.). Every minute, 71 hours of video are uploaded to the site and users can subscribe to and follow other users' content. Consequently, YouTube is an easy way to reach large audiences, as one does not have to be a member in order to watch videos uploaded by other users.

**Review sites.** Review sites such as TripAdvisor give customers the possibility to review products and services based on their own experiences. With a special focus on the hospitality and tourism industry, TripAdvisor users can upload photos and rate hotels, attractions, restaurants and businesses on a scale from one to five or write detailed comments about a venue. Today, there are more than 100 million reviews and opinions from travellers on TripAdvisor. Of these, there are more than 2,500,000 reviews on businesses, more than 116,000 on destinations and more than 1,100,000 on accommodations, more than 259,000 on attractions and more than 1,100,000 on restaurants (TripAdvisor, 2013). These numbers illustrate the excessive influence that TripAdvisor can potentially have on businesses. However, one of the criticised features of TripAdvisor is that in order to leave a comment on the page, the reviewers do not need to prove that they have actually been at the venue (Mawer, 2010). In contrast, online booking websites only allow comments by people who have stayed at the venue and have booked through the site. We also want to include online-travel sites, such as Booking.com and Expedia, in this category because of their significance in terms of user-generated content. Booking.com is a website that unites different types of

hotels and accommodation on one website, enables a comparison between these and makes booking possible on the same page. According to the company itself, the website covers 303,623 properties worldwide in more than 41,000 destinations. Furthermore, there are 20,180,000 reviews from guests (Booking.com, 2013a). Hotels can sign up free of charge but pay a commission to Booking.com every time a customer has booked through the page (Booking.com, 2013b). Expedia, Inc. is the largest online travel company in the world and owns online travel agencies such as Expedia.com, Hotels.com, Hotwire, Egencia, Trivago and others (Expedia, Inc., n.d.). Even though these sites are primarily characterised as online booking agents, they can provide a great amount of user-generated content for both travellers and businesses alike.

The list of blogs, forums, customer review sites and social networking sites is long and complex. New platforms are developed regularly, while already existing sites can lose importance over night or show less user activity than they have at an earlier stage. The social networking site MySpace is a good example: Being one of the most important social media pages a few years ago, Facebook clearly overtook this site in respect of registered users and on-site activity. This trend might continue, or yet another platform could take over parts of Facebook's market share or even Facebook's entire market share. Even though experts forecast trends and numbers, nobody can predict the future and the way consumers and businesses will make use of the Internet a few years from now.

### **Word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth**

People are known to share their opinions on experiences with other people, a practice we also refer to as word-of-mouth (WOM). "WOM refers to traditional offline interpersonal information sources" (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011, p. 15). It is common practice, and could include asking friends about destinations or hotel choices. With new trends and the development of electronics and the Internet, electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM) is gaining

importance. Bronner & de Hoog (2011) describe that eWOM “involves consumers’ comments about products and services posted on the Internet” (p. 15). This can imply holiday choices, scale ratings of hotels, and comments on locations and services (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011). Litvin et al. (2008) state that “eWOM will inevitably change the structure of travel information, the accessibility of travel information, and subsequently travellers’ knowledge and perception of various travel products” (p. 462). In other words, the features of Web 2.0 make information accessible to an increasing number of people who can now post their own opinions and access other travellers’ opinions. Geographical distances and boundaries become less significant in this context, and there are hardly any limits anymore to when and where information can be accessed. When it comes to eWOM, there are various channels which consumers and businesses can make use of. Litvin et al. (2008) analyse different eWOM channels and present suggestions on how to deal with them. The channels are often divided into the categories of synchronous and asynchronous, and one-to-one and one-to-many media.

Websites are asynchronous, one-to-many media. A website should not only inform but also make visitors desire to learn more about a destination or product and ideally trigger a desire to visit (Litvin et al., 2008). Thus, by offering online visitors access to opinions of satisfied guests, eWOM can be created (Litvin et al., 2008). “To accomplish this, positive product reviews and the posting of customer comments should be highlighted on the company’s web pages” (Litvin et al., 2008, p. 463).

Chat rooms, newsgroups and product review sites are categorised as being synchronous (Litvin et al., 2008). When it comes to company media, usage should be stimulated and bulletin boards should be made interesting in order to encourage re-visitation. This can also be achieved by allowing eWOM on the site through posted comments by visitors and by responding to these (Litvin et al., 2008). Public media should also be monitored, and even though the sample is not always representative, companies can feel the

average customer satisfaction level. Responding to negative reviews and comments can also diffuse negativity (Litvin et al., 2008). Furthermore, public online media give a more neutral picture than company-sponsored sites and are therefore handy when it comes to evaluating a company's own business and competitors.

Blogs and virtual communities are categorised as asynchronous channels which are accessed at different times by different users. Nevertheless, these channels can nearly be synchronous when used actively (Litvin et al., 2008). Blogs and virtual communities can be used in similar ways as newsgroups and product review sites. Positive eWOM can be spread by creating "buzz"; potential, popular bloggers can be invited for destination visits, gastronomic experiences or similar activities, in order to encourage positive eWOM on blogging sites and in virtual communities (Litvin et al., 2008).

Different hotels will most likely use eWOM in different ways, even though we expect to see similarities in the choice of eWOM channels among the hotels of this study. This research will especially focus on social media, review site and user-generated content channels that hotels include in their business activity.

### **User-generated content strategies**

Due to the potential influence user-generated content has on the hospitality and tourism industry, it is crucial that strategies are developed in order to manage it, but also to benefit from it. First of all, it is clear that tourism and travel marketers must have an appreciation and understanding of the influences and roles of user-generated content (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Secondly, Litvin et al. (2008) state that there are several reasons for hospitality and tourism marketers to consider and implement strategies to manage online interpersonal influence. Besides the intangible nature of hospitality and tourism products, the products are often characterised by seasonality and perishability, too, which raises the marketing stress levels. In addition, the hospitality and tourism industry is intensively

competitive, and successful management of eWOM can lead to a competitive advantage. Litvin et al. (2008) also note that “the industry lags behind others in the development and discussion of strategies for managing interpersonal influence in an electronic environment” (p. 459).

When comprising a strategy for eWOM and user-generated content, several similar suggestions can be detected from previous literature. Litvin et al. (2008) identify two major categories to manage eWOM in hospitality: informational and revenue generating. An informational perspective includes procedures, which enable hospitality and tourism marketers to harvest online user-generated discussion and feedback. The harvested information can be used for several purposes:

- Enhancing visitor satisfaction
- Product improvement
- Solving visitor problems
- Finding out about the visitor experience
- Analysing competitive strategies
- Monitoring company image (Litvin et al., 2008)

From a revenue generating perspective, managing user-generated content can potentially enhance business activity as well. In practice this means encouraging or stimulating good eWOM (Litvin et al., 2008). Moreover, O’Connor (2010) highlights the importance of monitoring and managing user-generated content in order to protect the brand image of the hotel and to succeed in the future. To be able to do that, hotels need to be more proactive and continuously engage in a dialogue with the customer (O’Connor, 2010).

Munar (2011) adds to the literature by distinguishing three different strategies that destination management organisations have adopted to manage user-generated content for their benefit: mimetic, advertising and analytic. Even though introduced in a destination-

marketing context, this framework could also be applied to hospitality marketing, where brand building is equally important.

The mimetic strategy implies to copying the style and e-culture of social network sites and creating an own website imitating this idea (Munar, 2011). The mimetic strategy can be considered as a fairly conservative way of creating user-generated content, as the control of the web content stays with the organisation and is mainly used for promotional purposes and not for user-to-user communication (Munar, 2011). A typical example would be creating Facebook or Twitter accounts, which are easy and inexpensive ways to enter the Web 2.0 world, and which also allow the company to monitor and manage the content of the sites. The advertising strategy has many similarities to the mimetic strategy, seeing social media and user-generated content pages as platforms for traditional and conservative marketing. An example could be banners and other advertisements on social media sites that allow this practice (Munar, 2011). As this form of strategy involves only one-way communication, it does not actually benefit the company in terms of user-generated content.

Compared to the mimetic and the advertising strategies, the analytic strategy has an opposite logic, as it sees user-generated content as a pool of information rather than a mere marketing tool. The analytic strategy can be divided into two perspectives: prevention and knowledge (Munar, 2011). The prevention approach is focused on searching and monitoring user-generated content, and finding out how social media sites portray the company, to be able to prevent potential crises, minimise damage or improve marketing in relation to the company's brands (Munar, 2011). This perspective clearly resembles the informational approach introduced by Litvin et al. (2008). The process of harvesting and implementing online information becomes a cycle that Hingley (2008) calls *the social media flow*. The social media flow can be considered to start from the point when consumers are talking about the company on social media. The information is then collected, processed and analysed, so

that the company can improve its marketing messages, products and services. If the implementation of the analysed information is successful, ideally this will make the company gain more profit and more loyal customers, who generate more positive word-of-mouth. Then, the cycle starts again.

The knowledge approach is taking the analytic strategy even further, aiming at transforming user-generated content into strategic knowledge (Munar, 2011). While user-generated content is often monitored by consultancy firms, the knowledge approach requires incorporating the relevant information into the entire culture and structures of the organisation (Munar, 2011).

However, Munar's (2012) study on destination management organisations reveals that the analytic strategy is seldom used compared to the mimetic and advertising strategies. In addition, the organisations often lack the knowledge and have a low level of formalised strategies when it comes to social media (Munar, 2012). These results imply that hotel managers are likely to face similar issues. Even though the literature review of user-generated content strategies indicates the importance of the matter and the need for solid social media strategies in the hospitality industry, so far the industry lags behind the development.

### **Managing user-generated content**

Litvin & Hoffman (2012) conducted a research experiment on how responses by customers and management to negative postings on travel review boards affect customer perceptions. Findings show that loyal customers' "willingness to counter negative comments, can positively affect the attitudes of potential guests" (Litvin & Hoffman, 2012, p. 139).

Findings also indicate that negative customer reviews which are refuted by positive customer reviews lead to more favourable attitudes towards a hotel purchase decision (Litvin & Hoffman, 2012). Even though not as strongly, the same goes for management responding to negative customer reviews (Litvin & Hoffman, 2012). Litvin & Hoffman (2012) therefore



suggest management to closely monitor online review sites. Through this research, we seek to find out whether hotel managers see user-generated online feedback as important and whether or not they integrate it into their strategic planning process.

Park & Allen (2012) conducted a research in order to link the management of user-generated content to different management styles, concluding that managers either approach online feedback from the problem-solving perspective, or from a more strategic point of view. These authors emphasise the fact that some hotel managers focus on replying to negative comments, while others solely concentrate on the positive feedback. Park & Allen encourage future research with special focus on how hotels use online reviews. In this paper, we intend to do this with special focus on hotel management.

Park & Allen (2012) conducted an exploratory research with a comparative case-study design in order to build a theory (Park & Allen, 2012). Altogether 34 four- and five-star hotels, their reviews on TripAdvisor and the management response patterns on TripAdvisor were analysed, suggesting that managers either use a problem-solving approach or a strategic approach when it comes to utilising online review information (Park & Allen, 2012). The problem-solving approach perceives online reviews as a means of “resolving customer complaints as quickly, efficiently, and discreetly as possible” (Park & Allen, 2012, p. 70), while the strategic approach utilises online review information “to improve operational efficiency and effectiveness and, less often, create innovative service offerings” (Park & Allen, 2012, p 70). Park & Allen also state that only one of the four researched hotels could be seen as a representative case of the latter approach; the hotel that was categorised as Upscale Regular Responder, replying to positive and negative reviews “at about the median rate for four- and five-star hotels in the city” (Park & Allen, 2012, p. 68). This hotel had an explicit social media strategy that encouraged engagement with online customers (Park & Allen, 2012). In the official hotel policy it was stated that companies were at a competitive

disadvantage if they failed to engage online. Secondly, the responsibility to answer online reviews now lay with employees at the hotel rather than with employees at the headquarters; therefore, this hotel employed “a dedicated online marketing manager who responds to reviews and who is also responsible for internet marketing and analytics” (Park & Allen, 2012, p. 68). Managers at this hotel aimed at having a specific target percentage in terms of online review responses, and had a response strategy that let management assume that they focused on extreme reviews, positive and negative (Park & Allen, 2010). Managers were to handle negative reviews in a serious way, while enthusiastic and positive reviews were responded to in a way that would engage guests in a more on-going relationship. Park & Allen’s findings show that all four hotels of their study use the problem-solving approach (2012). Online reviews are seen as “another, inescapable channel for dealing with guest complaints” (Park & Allen, 2012, p. 70).

One can easily see the increasing importance of eWOM and user-generated content in today’s globalised and technologically advanced world. There is no doubt that people post and blog their opinions and experiences. The question is: what does management do about it? Do different approaches by management give different results and do hotels actually make use of user-generated content in order to improve their services? How important is user-generated content when it comes to hotel venues? And how do hotel managers feel about trends that come with Web 2.0? We seek answers to these questions by using our previously stated research questions.

The theoretical overview section has given the reader an impression of Internet trends in the constantly changing environments of the tourism and hospitality industry. Even though previous research shows up opportunities evolving with these new trends, some literature criticises the new movement and certain behaviour towards social media trends. Of course companies should also be critical towards the new features of Web 2.0, as some platforms

might be more useful for the hospitality and tourism industry than others. Munar & Jacobsen (2013), for example, show up that Web 1.0 websites can be perceived as being more trustworthy than Web 2.0 content. However, the increasing amount of social media platforms and user-generated content sites cannot be ignored, and should not be underestimated.

### **Methodology**

The choice of paradigms and methodology that we base our research on will be presented in this chapter. The chosen methods are presented together with the rationale that leads us to this choice. In addition, we will explain how the data was collected and analysed during the research process. Reliability and validity will be discussed in the end of the chapter to provide deeper insight into our study.

#### **The research paradigm and design**

This chapter will explain the reasoning behind our chosen techniques of conducting research. Firstly, it is important to shortly discuss the paradigms and perspectives guiding us through our research. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) state, “questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigms, which we define as the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways” (p. 105).

As basic belief systems, paradigms are based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions, and the nature of each paradigm can be defined by answering three fundamental questions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The three fundamental questions are interconnected, meaning that the answer to any of these questions will define the way the next one can be answered. Guba and Lincoln suggest an order to approach these fundamental questions:

- *The ontological question: What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?*

- *The epistemological question: What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?*
- *The methodological question: How can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding whatever he or she believes can be known?* (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108)

Answering these questions leads us to the roots of four major paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism. The suggested paradigms have been widely accepted as research frames, despite of some critique and suggested additions (see e.g. Heron and Reason, 1996). The four paradigms see the world from different perspectives, which naturally influence the conduct of the study. Historically, *positivism* has dominated the research field in physical and social sciences for hundreds of years. The idea behind the positivist paradigm is that there is an objective reality, which can be known and described by humans if the right methods are applied and if bias are minimised (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Typically, the positivist approach involves quantitative methods, verifying and testing hypothesis. Like the positivist paradigm, also the *post-positivist approach* believes in an existing reality, however it can only be known imperfectly, because the background and values of the researcher influence the study (Robson, 2002). Therefore, objectivity must be pursued and bias eliminated in order to get as close as possible to the actual reality. From a methodological perspective, the post-positivist approach focuses on falsifying hypothesis instead of verifying them (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Both the positivist and post-positivist paradigms are associated with generating hypotheses, and mostly based on verifying or falsifying them, whereas *critical theorists* to a greater extent rely more on a dialogue and question the natural state and challenge the prevailing structures. Critical theorists assume that there is a 'reality' that is apprehensible (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This reality has been shaped over time by social, political, cultural and economic views. Thus, it is assumed that the acquired knowledge is always value

mediated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, it is also believed that the confrontation of subjectivity and objectivity is problematic. *The constructivist approach* is already differentiated from the other three paradigms by its ontological position. Constructivists do not believe in one true reality, but in several, apprehendable realities, which in some cases can conflict with each other (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The realities are based on intangible mental constructions, created by human beings and their own social realities. This clearly affects the epistemological approach as well, leading to a situation where the researcher and participant are assumed to be interactively linked. Therefore, it is logical that the methodology of the constructivist approach is created through interaction and dialogue between the researcher and the participant.

We believe that none of the paradigms or methodologies is superior over others, or applicable to every study. However, the methodology is inevitably related to philosophical foundations in any research process and also qualitative and quantitative approaches have their roots in these philosophies. On the other hand, none of the paradigms exclude either of the two approaches, but due to the varying ways of comprehending the world, it is evident that there are tendencies in each paradigm to lean towards either a qualitative or quantitative approach. According to Silverman (2010) a qualitative study rather answers to the question “how” than to the question of “how many”. As the positivists and post-positivist see the world as something that can be measured and explained, it is likely that they often favour quantitative methods. Critical theorists’ and constructivists’ worldviews are more dependent on human intelligence, inclusiveness of values and social structures, which explains their tendency towards qualitative methods. As especially constructivism is often entwined with qualitative research, we feel that this approach is appropriate for our study.

A closer examination of the main research question of our study, “how do the managers of hotels handle online user-generated content?” indicates that this matter needs to

be approached from a qualitative perspective. In addition to the main research question, also the sub-questions, “which user-generated content channels do hotel managers use?”, “how important do hotel managers consider user-generated content to be?” and “how is user-generated content implemented into the hotel’s operations?” and “how is user-generated content implemented into the future planning process?” imply that the applied methods need to give detailed and descriptive answers to make an understanding of the phenomenon possible, and to find a comprehensive meaning of it. Generally, qualitative research is associated with inductive reasoning (Neuman, 2012). In practice this means that the rationale behind it is not to test an existing theory but rather to build a detailed analysis of the acquired material. Qualitative research is often continuously developed and being refined while gathering data (Neuman, 2012). This also characterises our study of how hotels manage user-generated content. As there is no established way of conducting this particular research, due to the lack of previous empirical data, it is obvious that the research methods, and especially the interview questions, need to be evolved and improved along the process while more information is gained.

This research can be considered as a study with exploratory purpose, due to its novelty and its aim to fill a research gap in the field of managing user-generated content in the hospitality industry. An exploratory study often investigates little-understood issues (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011), which also characterise this research. User-generated content is not exactly a new concept itself, but in the context of hospitality management few studies that would allow large-scale comparisons have been conducted. Evidently, the exploratory nature of our research requires flexible and adjustable research methods.

### **Semi-structured interview as a method**

Interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways of trying to understand human beings and their actions, even though there is always an element of ambiguity in the

spoken and written word (Fontana & Frey, 2003). There are a variety of forms of interviews and multiple ways to use interviews as a research method. Traditionally, interviews have been divided into three different types according to their structure: structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Fontana & Frey, 2003).

In structured interviews, all the respondents are asked the same series of questions with a limited set of response options (Fontana & Frey, 2003). This leaves very little room for variation in answers. Unstructured interviews are naturally the complete opposite of structured interviews, and they have no set response options, not necessarily even preset questions or settings. For a qualitative study, unstructured interviewing can provide a greater depth of data, due to its nature (Fontana & Frey, 2003). As a conclusion, semi-structured interviews can be considered an interview type that combines characteristics from both structured and unstructured interviews. In practice, this means that the questions can be the same for all the participants, but the answering options are not limited or specified in advance.

In our opinion, the design of semi-structured interviews will support our research intentions in the most effective way, and is most likely to generate useful answers to our research questions. Exploratory studies often require an interview guide, which is less structured (Hennink et al., 2011). Thus, due to the novelty of the topic, the answers of the interviewees cannot be completely anticipated, and therefore, a flexible method is a necessity. A semi-structured interview is chosen because it leaves enough room for follow-up questions as well, but the questions can still be planned around the same themes and main topics. This allows both a comparison within the data, and also the possibility to expand the topics during the conversation if needed.

## **Preparations**

**Building up the interview guide.** The interview guide was built on existing theory and previous studies on user-generated content and the use of social media. Our three sub-

questions answering the main research question were designed throughout the literature review process. The interview questions were planned to project the research questions. Therefore, finding answers to the interview questions will make it possible to conclude main findings and reflect them to the existing literature. Thus, the literature review can be considered as the first stage of the data collection of this research. The interview guide was designed in accordance with six main themes which were notably repeated in the literature: online strategy; channels and tools; monitoring; managing user-generated content; benchmarking; and views on the future. See Appendix 1 for the interview guide.

**Test interview.** Before the actual interviews, a test interview was conducted. The manager chosen for the test interview is dealing with user-generated content, but as the hotel is located outside of the Stavanger region, the interview could not be used in the actual study. The test interview gave us a great amount of information in terms of the management of user-generated content in this particular hotel, and also confirmed that the designed interview questions would logically lead us back to our research questions. Some minor changes were made in the interview guide but in general we were confident that the guide would work in the field as well. However, when conducting the actual interviews with the hotel managers, it turned out that most of them had much less knowledge of user-generated content and social media than the person in our test interview. Therefore, a need for changes throughout the actual interviews was recognised and the interview questions were slightly modified during the interviews, also depending on the manager's knowledge of the topic.

**Data collection.** After the literature review and preparations, the field work was carried out. The empirical data was collected during March and April 2013 in eleven hotels in the Stavanger region. Unlike in quantitative studies, random sampling is rarely used in qualitative research. This is often because of the different goals that these types of studies have. The qualitative researcher is more interested in a small collection of cases or units rather



than a representative sample of a large population. The small collection of cases can demonstrate key features of a study and by highlighting informative cases it is possible to clarify and deepen the understanding of the phenomenon (Neuman, 2012). Hence, it is important to use a sampling method in which the subjects are picked intentionally. Purposive sampling is a type of non-random sample that is used to select elements that match narrowly defined criteria (Neuman, 2012). In this study, we focus on hotels in the Stavanger region and their use of social media and user-generated content. Therefore, it is only natural that we chose a sampling method which narrows down the sample for especially to informative cases.

We located all the hotels in the Stavanger region with conference facilities, as we wanted to assess business hotels as our main informative group. Nineteen hotels were found and the required number of interviews was set to be between seven and fifteen.

**Selecting and contacting the informants.** Using a purposive sampling technique, most of the business hotels in Stavanger, Sola and Sandnes were contacted. A few of the hotels were left out due to their inconveniently distant location in the region, purely for practicality. The potential informants were contacted by email firstly, stating the purpose of the study, and secondly asking for a suitable time for an interview. Participants were also requested to be responsible of, and familiar with the use of user-generated content and social media in the hotel, to be able to answer the interview questions. Because only eight hotels replied to the first e-mail, another one was sent out to hotels that were considered to broaden the sample the most, due to their size, chain dependency or independency, and location. In this case the email was especially targeted at small local hotels instead of big chain hotels, which comprised most of the sample at that point. At this stage, some of the hotels were also contacted by phone. This procedure resulted in three more interviews, and eleven interviews altogether were considered a sufficient sample for the research. Before the actual interview, all hotel managers were made aware of the purpose of the study, either by email or phone, and

they knew what kind of topics would be dealt with during the interview. However, even though requested by some, the interview questions were not sent to the interviewees beforehand, in order to allow for fair and equivalent interviews for all the participants.

**Conducting the interviews.** Most of the interviews were conducted on the spot in the studied hotels; however, one of the interviews was carried out at another occasion. The participants were interviewed by the authors of this study themselves to make sure that all the necessary information was gained, and to create the highest possible degree of similarity and equality for all the interviews. However, as mentioned before, it was sometimes necessary to modify interview questions slightly due to differences in the manager's knowledge of user-generated content. Nevertheless, the interviewers made sure that all the relevant themes were discussed during the interview, and leading questions were averted in order to avoid bias. When arranging the interviews, we requested that a person responsible of user-generated content and online feedback would be participating in the study. However, the positions of the representatives differed greatly. Table 1 illustrates the positions of the participants of each hotel. In some hotels though, more than one person was responsible of user-generated content or social networks.

	Participant's position in the hotel	Length of the interview
<b>Hotel A</b>	Operations Manager	27 min
<b>Hotel B</b>	Front Office Manager	37 min
<b>Hotel C</b>	Operations Manager	25 min
<b>Hotel D</b>	Marketing Manager	36 min
<b>Hotel E</b>	General Manager	33 min
<b>Hotel F</b>	General Manager	41 min
<b>Hotel G</b>	Hotel Manager	21 min
<b>Hotel H</b>	Hotel Manager	41 min
<b>Hotel I</b>	General Manager	34 min
<b>Hotel J</b>	Room and Sales Manager	31 min
<b>Hotel K</b>	Front Office Manager	25 min

The interviews were conducted between 11 March and 9 April 2013. All the interviews were carried out in English, as it was expected that all the interviewed managers in hotels with domestic and international business travellers would have a sufficient level of English and language barriers therefore would not be a problem. The length of the interviews varied between 21 minutes and 41 minutes, and they generated altogether 5 hours and 51 minutes of recorded audio. See Table 1 for the length of each interview. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed into text form for analysing purposes. In addition, part of the analysis was done simultaneously when transcribing the audio files. Since the language or the body gestures of the interviewees were not believed to be relevant in this research, but rather the information gained from the informants, the interviews were transcribed precisely, but informally in some extent. This means that the sentences were written down exactly as they were said by the informants, but no special characters were used and most repetition, filler words and voices of thinking, were left out.

### **Organising and analysing the data**

Analyses, interpretations and conclusions of the acquired data are key elements of a research, as the results of the study are revealed at this stage. This, however, in a qualitative research is often not a straightforward process, but as Marshall and Rossman (1999) put it: “Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and interpretation to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat” (p. 150). Therefore, the process of deriving meaning from qualitative data requires several steps, and researchers often need to develop ideas and theories during the data collection process, building up general ideas from the data (Neuman, 2012). By looking for similarities and differences in the data, it is possible to build up an explanation for the researched phenomenon. The analysis will be sufficient when main categories are defined, relationships between them established, and when they are integrated into a credible interpretation (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Firstly, the data needs to be organised into documents and broad topics. Transcribing and storing the interviews, in both audio and text form, was the first step of organising the data in this research. Furthermore, the data can be coded, which is an essential part of qualitative data analysis and helps to find categories, themes and patterns within the text. Traditionally, there have been two main approaches to analyse data in qualitative research: inductive and deductive (Hennink et al., 2011). The deductive perspective approaches the data through topics and concepts set before the data collection, whereas the inductive perspective develops and explores issues directly from the data (Hennink et al., 2011). In practice, this impacts on how the codes are derived from the data, how they are compared and finally interpreted. However, often the qualitative analysis process requires a combination of both. Trying to understand issues in an exploratory research like ours, the inductive approach will be the most important, guiding us through the coding stage. However, as there is actually

previous research available on topics such as social media, user-generated content and electronic word-of mouth, concepts and themes found in relevant, previous literature were also applied in the search for codes.

When it comes to the actual analysis, there are various ways to analyse qualitative material. Typically, there have been three major social science and literacy approaches to textual-discourse analysis: content analysis, semiotics and discourse analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Our goal to understand and to contribute to the knowledge of user-generated content in the hospitality industry can be reflected through qualitative content analysis, which aims at extracting emerging themes, categories and insights from the text (Patton, 2002). Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 18). As Krippendorff refers to text and other meaningful matters, we too mean by *text* all the obtained qualitative data. In everyday use text is often restricted to written language. However, the definition by modern linguistics has expanded the term ‘text’ to cover almost every kind of utterance, for example; language, maps, interviews, photos or conversation (Alba-Juez, 2009). This definition derives from the famous statement by Derrida (1976): “*There is nothing outside the text*” (p. 158), meaning that everything we use as a way to express ourselves can be considered as text. Especially in qualitative research, this is of great importance for the analysis process. Content analysis is a great tool for summarizing data in order to put findings into a larger context. In practice this means examining the transcribed texts and trying to find similarities and differences based on the codes which were developed during the earlier stage of the study. In addition, much of the categorising was already done while transcribing the interviews and main themes were identified in the text.

**Reliability and validity**

When reflecting the results of the study, issues of reliability and validity need to be discussed. However, in qualitative research, estimating reliability and validity can be challenging, due to the interpretative nature of qualitative data, which cannot be measured and tested in the same way as quantitative data. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the researchers' paradigm assumptions will define their choices throughout the study, affecting also the validity procedures (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Therefore it is important to bear in mind the interpretative and contextualized perspectives behind this study. In addition, a research interview as a method is flexible, context-sensitive and depending on the interplay between the interviewer and interviewee (Kvale, 1994).

*Reliability* in research means that the results can be repeated and that they are not coincidental (Neuman, 2012). However, in qualitative studies, two researchers do not necessary get identical results, even though they can be equally reliable. This illustrates the many facets and possible interpretations of qualitative data. Thus, Neuman (2012), states that qualitative data is reliable, when it has been observed and measured in a consistent and self-conscious way, and when the measures are adjusted to fit a specific research situation. As the goal of good qualitative research is to understand and generate knowledge of the studied phenomenon, it is important to obtain precise and rich descriptions. In fact, the rich and in-depth descriptions have an intrinsic value in qualitative studies (Kvale, 1994).

With semi-structured interviews being our main data collection method, all the interviews were recorded, transcribed and saved, in order to retain the authenticity of the data. Furthermore, extensive notes were taken during the interviews. In addition, being two researchers conducting the interviews was recognised a clear advantage during the data collection process. While one was leading the conversation, the other one had time to take notes, concentrate on the given information and make observations. With the researcher being

the main data collection instrument, it is essential to be self-conscious about one's actions in the interview situation. Throughout the process, we were aware of our influence on the interviewees, even though interaction is also one of the strengths of an interview. However, we tried to create similar settings for all the interviewees by conducting all the interviews by ourselves, asking the same questions in the same way, and providing the same information for all the participants before the interviews. The test interview was noted to be useful in terms of interviewing techniques, as it gave us experience and a premonition about how the interviewees might react to each question.

*Validity* measures the relevancy of the research, meaning that the chosen methods reflect and measure the factors that they are supposed to measure (Neuman, 2012). In qualitative studies, the essential link between a concept and empirical measures is often demonstrated through authenticity (Neuman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1995). Kvale (1994) simply states that valid inference is well grounded and derived from its premises, and consequently the validity depends on the quality of the craftsmanship of the interviewing and interpreting.

Validity is typically divided into internal and external validity. *Internal validity* is related to the design of the study, referring to the extent to which we can confidently state that our studied knowledge explains the results, instead of another factor (Neuman, 2012). In a qualitative study, this draws attention to the sample. In fact, the participants of the study are the key to the validity, as the constructivist paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed, and thus based on the perceptions and experiences of the interviewees (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Therefore, the goal is to capture a fair, honest, and balanced sample of social life (Neuman, 2012). In our study, the sample was narrowed down to business hotel managers, who are responsible of user-generated content and social media in their hotels. This is considered to provide representative insight into the situation in hotels in the Stavanger

region. In addition, keeping the amount of informants rather limited allowed for more in-depth interpretations.

*External validity* means the ability to generalise the findings beyond the setting (Neuman, 2012). However, in a qualitative study, the generalisation attempts are often implicit and not easily demonstrated due to the context-sensitivity of the studied issues. Lincoln & Guba (1985) have tried to replace the term generalisation with transferability in qualitative research. In practice, this means providing enough thick, rich description for the readers, who can then draw their own conclusions on whether the results can be transferred into another context and to what extent. For this procedure, one also needs to consider the context in which this knowledge is being transferred. Therefore, even though our results are presented in the context of the hospitality industry, Norway and a town like Stavanger that is characterised by business travel, it might be possible to transfer some of the results to other industries, countries, towns and surrounding environments.

## **Results**

This chapter presents the results from our in-depth interviews. The information is structured under six main themes that also conform to the interview guide and management responses: *channels, attitudes, social media strategy, resources, present practices and views on the future*. By introducing these categories, we aim at giving a clear picture of the situation and sorting the information in a useful way.

### **Channels**

All managers of the studied hotels state the use of TripAdvisor and Facebook when it comes to social media and user-generated content channels. Most of the hotels also use Booking.com. Additionally, Hotels.com, Expedia, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and Agoda were also mentioned. Several hotels of our study link to TripAdvisor, Facebook and



Twitter on their website. However, we emphasise the fact that many hotels make use of internal feedback programmes and chains often require the active use of those. It seems as if social media and user-generated content sometimes are not seen as being important due to the responses managers receive from internal feedback programmes.

*We use TripAdvisor quite frequently... and Facebook ... and Twitter not so often, we could use Twitter more. We also have Instagram, that's just photos but it's good... if we have campaigns. We do use booking.com; on this website guests can also post comments. (Hotel K)*

*So far it's TripAdvisor and Facebook, mainly we focus on our own guest feedback that we send to people/guests who have been staying with us... We listen the most to the people who answer our surveys. And of course TripAdvisor is important. We know it's a major site of course and many people use it to plan their trips and so on. So we also try to keep up to date there but so far that's more like a window in a boutique, you show what you want the people to see, but it's the people who come into the hotel that are really important [...] We also use Instagram... now we have a photo-competition on Instagram for example. (Hotel I)*

*I obviously get alerts from TripAdvisor, very importantly. And we are also very active in replying there. [...] I definitely see the importance of being active there. And then I follow booking.com as well. However, you can't give feedback there. [...] Facebook is still not as much of a dialogue as I would want it to be. It's still sort of a monologue and I'm trying to get people to interact, but it's not that easy. But TripAdvisor, that's the truth right there. What people believe... Because the people who are with us on*

*Facebook, love us. They like us because they like us already. On TripAdvisor you get both. So I would say that in different ways TripAdvisor and Facebook are the most important [channels]. (Hotel D)*

All the interviewed managers have clear favourites when it comes to preferences in social media sites. Several hotel websites link directly to Facebook and TripAdvisor and a few hotel websites also link to Twitter. Manager of Hotel G mentions that their hotel does not use Twitter, however, the very same hotel has a Twitter link on its website. Furthermore, the account is inactive, with the last “tweet” being more than 1,5 years ago.

The hotels are often only present on YouTube on chain level rather than on individual level. Some of these chain sites are updated regularly and also recently, while others show the last activity to be approximately two years ago. In several cases, we had problems identifying who the poster actually was; the hotel, the chain or an external person. One might wonder how seriously posts and uploads can be taken when the source is unclear or unidentifiable. Only one manager states the use of Agoda, which is another online travel agent review site such as Booking.com. However, at current state, Agoda can be seen as less relevant for the travel and hospitality industry due to its small size compared to platforms such as TripAdvisor. Norwegian hotels are not present to the same extent and there are fewer or no reviews on many of the hotels of this study.

Several of the interviewed managers could not clearly distinguish between Hotels.com and Booking.com; this could be an indication that these sites are not regularly accessed by all of the managers. Furthermore, several hotel chains and partner hotels of chains have terminated their agreement with Hotels.com and Expedia. Management described these companies as being too pricy and as having unacceptable and unattractive conditions.

We could also see that some hotel managers reply to online reviews on TripAdvisor regularly, but not quickly. Some reviews are answered months after having been posted; this contradicts managers' opinions of having to answer feedback quickly in order to effectively achieve a service-recovery.

In general, one gets the impression that the social media strategies of several hotels are underdeveloped and therefore there is no clear reasoning for certain ways of using different channels. When taking a closer look online, at the way channels are used, there is a tendency to utilise Facebook for promotion and competitions, and TripAdvisor for problem-solving and feedback. Nevertheless, some managers include marketing elements in TripAdvisor responses and feedback elements in Facebook replies.

For some hotels, responsibilities of social media content lies with one person only, while other hotels have several managers and employees working on different tasks and different channels. Nevertheless, in most cases there is no clear written structure of who is to be in charge of which social media tasks, and hardly any of the interviewed managers have clear instructions in their job descriptions. Accordingly, most social media tasks seem to be divided between management and employees on an oral basis and most social media work and interaction is done on a voluntary basis.

Finally, we would like to emphasise the fact that the hotels of our study seem to be rather effective at collecting email addresses from various guests who stay at the hotels. It is often mentioned that email addresses are collected upon booking or upon check-in. These email addresses are used when it comes to internal feedback programmes, as questionnaires are sent directly to the customer. When it comes to links on the hotels' own websites, we believe that several hotels have not seen the full potential of these connections. Nevertheless, several hotels link to both TripAdvisor and Facebook, and several managers mention that improvements and changes of the hotel homepage in the near future will result in more links

to social media platforms. EWOM used by the different hotels is dominated by asynchronous media, such as Facebook and TripAdvisor. Nevertheless, communication on these pages can happen relatively fast when users are active (as stated by Litvin et al., 2008), and can therefore be categorised as synchronous in several cases. The social media that these hotels make use of belongs to both one-to-many and many-to-many communication tools, as depicted earlier in this study. Furthermore we could clearly see that the review site TripAdvisor and social networking site Facebook were the most important channels for the hotels included in the study. Other social media sites, such as blogs, microblogs, media-sharing sites were not commonly used. A reason for this could be the mere size and influence that TripAdvisor and Facebook have, as they can be counted as the largest relevant social media platforms at current time.

### **Attitudes**

Since the results were of large quantity, we divided this section into sub-categories:

Marketing and feedback, Positive and negative feedback, Authenticity of reviews, Business and leisure travellers, Benefits and opportunities, Risks and challenges and Professional background.

**Marketing and feedback.** User-generated content is used for benchmarking to a minor extent, but not all managers monitor their competitors on social media web pages. There is also a strong tendency to social media sites as a feedback channel rather than a possible marketing channel. If used as a marketing channel, this is likely done through posts on Facebook rather than through giving answers to customer ratings on a site like TripAdvisor. Managers frequently mention regular updates and competitions on Facebook in order to market their hotel.

Our study shows that five out of eleven hotels answer all or almost all online reviews on TripAdvisor, while three out of eleven hotels answer every now and then on TripAdvisor

and prioritise negative feedback when answering. Three of eleven hotels do not reply to online reviews on TripAdvisor. In the case of “respond to no reviews on TripAdvisor”, the manager of one of the hotels expresses that negative feedback is a priority. Analysing this hotel’s TripAdvisor page shows that there are no negative reviews and therefore responding to none could be justified by the statement of prioritising negative online feedback. Table 2 illustrates the response pattern of the hotels on TripAdvisor.

<i>Response patterns on TripAdvisor</i>	
Hotel A	No responses to reviews
Hotel B	Irregular responses (prioritising negative reviews)
Hotel C	(Almost) all reviews responded to
Hotel D	Irregular responses (prioritising negative reviews)
Hotel E	Irregular responses (prioritising negative reviews)
Hotel F	(Almost) all reviews responded to
Hotel G	(Almost) all reviews responded to
Hotel H	No responses to reviews
Hotel I	(Almost) all reviews responded to
Hotel J	No responses to reviews
Hotel K	(Almost) all reviews responded to

Our study reveals that most of the studied hotels work with social media on a voluntary basis. There are few clear structures on who is in charge for dealing with these matters and in which way they should be dealt with. Guidelines are extremely vague and the authors get the impression that things generally rise and fall with the personal opinions of one or two managers of the hotels. If a manager considers social media as important and if he or she has time to deal with it in addition to his or her regular work tasks, then it is dealt with. Nevertheless, responses to online reviews are of varying quality from hotel to hotel and in some cases they are just absent.

The conducted research also shows that hotels, which are part of a chain, have internal feedback programmes that come with requirements and obligations from the chain headquarters. Also independent hotels work with internal feedback programs in order to analyse customer satisfaction. Several interviewees express a significant amount of trust in these internal systems, clearly pointing out where their priorities lie. Only one of the hotels did not have an internal feedback system that was used regularly throughout the year, but only once a year. When it comes to internal guest feedback systems, Manager of Hotel I states:

*Mainly we focus on our own guest feedback that we send to people/guests who have been staying with us. We have survey questions, that's the major concern when it comes to running the hotel... We listen most to the people who answer our surveys.*

*Most of our guest feedback is from our internal online feedback system that we send out. That's where we get (say) about 90 % of our feedback. (Hotel B)*

**Positive and negative feedback.** When it comes to answering online feedback on social media sites, opinions vary about the importance of prioritising positive or negative reviews, or both. Some managers see the negative feedback as the most important while other managers see the negative and the positive feedback as equally important. When stating that negative feedback is prioritised over positive feedback, Manager of Hotel A mentions:

*I wish we would have more time to answer the positive reviews, too. We get a lot of positive feedback as well but I don't know, you stress with the negative posts and you forget the good things, and that's even more important, to answer the positive ones.*

Nevertheless, studying this hotel's TripAdvisor pages, shows that no reviews are answered, neither positive nor negative. When asked which feedback is replied to, Manager of Hotel B states:

*More to the negative. Ideally we should probably answer everything, saying 'thank you for giving us feedback, I'm glad that you enjoyed your stay, welcome back anytime'. There was a period when I had a lot of time, like a year ago I had a lot of time, and I answered everything. In the ideal world you do that, answer everything and thank them for leaving feedback and using their spare time to leave us constructive feedback. But it's not always that we get to prioritise it, unfortunately."*

A look at TripAdvisor confirms that negative feedback is prioritised. Manager of Hotel D clarifies the following when it comes to prioritising negative feedback:

*On TripAdvisor, I do. On Facebook, because I'm sort of there all the time, I respond to everything. On TripAdvisor I prioritise to respond to the negative feedback. Like I said, I'm aware that it's just as important to answer the positive comments, really. It's just a case of time. So I'm getting to it. But with the negative, it feels like it's more important to address it.*

Analysing TripAdvisor shows the prioritising of negative feedback. Facebook pages confirm replies to positive feedback. Manager of Hotel E states that only negative feedback is answered since:

*It is not like we are in there trying to influence everything all the time. And that's the point with not answering all the good things. It may seem that we are encouraging people to write nice things about us. We would like it to be most natural. It's a customer's website. We are allowed to reply if we like to.*

Through TripAdvisor this statement can be confirmed.

**Authenticity of reviews.** All managers believe that “fake” reviews are currently not a problem and that these could be easily recognised. However, “fake” reviews are frequently mentioned as future risks. These opinions somewhat contradict each other and are unreasoned for, as none of the managers express why there should be fewer genuine reviews in the future than there are now. Nevertheless, several managers state their concern about exaggerated negative reviews: when customers are disappointed in something minor and suddenly criticise everything about the hotel on social media sites. Manager of Hotel F mentions:

*I don't think you can make it fake for a long time. You can make it fake for short period of time. But more and more people are looking at TripAdvisor and you can't prevent the negative comments from coming, they will be there anyway. [...] And that's where you are busted. Sometimes it feels a bit of unfair too, because some people are never happy. But there's no use commenting on them, it's their experience and if that's how they feel that's the truth.*

**Business and leisure travellers.** The majority of managers believe that leisure travellers make more use of user-generated content than business travellers, and that international travellers make more use of user-generated content than Norwegian travellers.



The interviewed managers generally believe that leisure travellers make more use of social media than business travellers. However none of the managers seemed to analyse whether business or leisure travellers have different concerns and whether business travellers give different feedback than leisure travellers when it comes to social media. Statements indicate opinions rather than facts. Nevertheless, stating one's purpose of travel is optional, not mandatory on TripAdvisor and other social media pages. Booking.com might give more user data to the hotel but this information is not available to the public. Nevertheless, Manager of Hotel A states in a different context:

*Always when there is a bad guest feedback I ask the receptionist who has been working, because I normally see when they have been staying with us, not on TripAdvisor, but on Booking.com and Expedia and our web site. And we normally see the name as well so I ask the housekeeping who has been working, or the café, if they remember the guest.*

This statement shows that this manager relates guest-data from inside of the hotel to data from social media pages. This should therefore also be able to help with business/ leisure traveller statistics and division. To the question whether he or she sees a difference between leisure and business travellers when it comes to user-generated content, Manager of Hotel G expresses:

*Leisure travellers have to pay for themselves so I think they have maybe higher expectations. It seems like most of them give feedback on TripAdvisor. The business travellers do give feedback but maybe not as often.*

As all of the hotels are conference hotels and often fully booked due to business travel rather than due to leisure travel, one might wonder whether the less strategic and irregular use of social media might be due to the fact that many managers believe it to be dominated by leisure travellers.

**Benefits and opportunities.** Table 3 gives the reader an overview over the benefits and opportunities the interviewed managers associate with social media and user-generated content.

<b>Table 3</b>
<i>Benefits and opportunities associated with social media and UGC</i>
Cost-efficiency
Honest feedback
Trigger to improve services and products
Reach (possibility to reach a high number of people)
Reaches the leisure segment
Direct contact with the customer
Velocity (quick feedback)
Visibility
Effectiveness
Possibility to give feedback after the stay
Communication from customer to customer
Customers' appreciation of public opinions
Marketing
Service-recovery by quick replies
Generation of traffic to the hotel

Manager of Hotel D says the following about benefits and opportunities when it comes to social media:

*There are many. For us, especially as an individual hotel, it gives us a lot of free marketing basically. As for the customer, the most reliable marketing is obviously coming from other people who have no reason to say it's good when it isn't. It's the best marketing you can get. But you have to take the good with the bad.*

*I think the most important fact with the IT revolution that we've been through is that we get feedback very quickly and a lot of feedback. That helps us improve. We need a lot to be able to see what to focus on and where we should put our efforts to become better at what we do. So I think that's the most important thing, that you get a lot of feedback and quick feedback. That's the main benefit for us. (Hotel B)*

Manager of Hotel A states the following benefits and opportunities when it comes to user-generated content and social media:

*You learn a lot of from them. We don't overnight in our own hotel, we are not guests anyway. We try to look with guests' eyes but it's not the same. (With social media) you find so much information that you wouldn't normally get. It's a good positive thing.*

*For this hotel it has been really good for marketing. And also inside the hotel, it is so much easier to work with people and see what we can do better. When there is something that I have just said that we need to work with, it's not good enough. Well why, why do you think it's not good enough? It is not me, it's the customer. It's easier to be more specific and concrete on what to focus on (when it comes directly from the customer).” (Hotel E)*

*I think honest comments and feedback, direct contact with the customer, it is available for everyone to see it. (Hotel K)*

**Risks and challenges.** Table 4 gives the reader an overview over the risks and challenges the interviewed managers associate with user-generated content and social media.

<b>Table 4</b>
<i>Risks and challenges associated with UGC and social media</i>
None
"Fake" reviews
False accusation in reviews
Changing environment
Continuous evolvement
Visibility when it comes to negative feedback
Reputation at stake
Unnecessary feedback
Uncontrollability
Scores easy to manipulate
Unfairness
The necessity to attend to it continuously
Time-consuming
The need to act fast and to be active
The convenience to give anonymous negative feedback

Regarding risks and challenges in relation to user-generated content and social media,

Manager of Hotel I states:

*I'm not sure if there are any drawbacks. Of course if you don't handle it properly, then you'll be in trouble. You have to use time and to give them feedback quickly. If you go on Facebook or TripAdvisor you also need to make time for it, for working with it. A dead Facebook site isn't helping anyone so.*

*That would be if they write really bad things, like horrible experience but that's why I think it's good that we reply. So we can actually explain what happened or change whatever situation that was bad. But also, you cannot control it, like TripAdvisor; you don't know whoever writes this comment, maybe not a guest at all at your hotel".*

(Hotel C)

*The main risk is if you are not seeing it quickly enough, it could become something bad, that could escalate. (Hotel H)*

On the question whether there are risks, negative impacts and challenges when it comes to social media, Manager of Hotel G states:

*Not that I can think of. I haven't experienced anything yet. As long as we use it the right way, without breaking any of the rules we'll be fine.*

**Professional background.** The interviewed managers have different educational backgrounds and various types of previous work experiences. Previous research suggest that the professional background of a person can influence the way he or she deals with online review comments (Park & Allen, 2012). It is likely that the personal background of the interviewees influences their view on and behaviour towards social media and user-generated content. Nevertheless, too few parallels were spotted and in order to keep the study anonymous we do not refer to the managers' personal backgrounds in our study.

### **Social Media Strategy**

The overall impression after conducting interviews with managers is that even though all of the interviewees consider online marketing to be highly important, none of the hotels have a clear strategy when it comes to social media and user-generated content. The overall amount of time and resources used on user-generated content varies between the different hotels but in general findings suggest no clear structures when it comes to the handling of social media and user-generated content. In general, online marketing is in some cases limited due to chain policies, even though social media policies from the chains set certain limits.

Strategies on how to behave towards social media do not seem very developed at current stage. Manager of Hotel G mentions:

*We should probably be much better at using social media. I think that's something we have to plan on how we're going to use in the future. But for now we don't have anything really.*

When Manager of Hotel I speaks about TripAdvisor and Facebook, he/she points out:

*We see to that our pages on these sites are up to date, text and pictures of course. The strategy isn't quite clear, if I can put it that way. Of course we read the feedback on TripAdvisor and reply and so on but we haven't made a concrete strategy... Eventually that's up to each hotel, at this stage at least, to set its' own strategy. The most important for us is to keep the sites up to date, the pictures and texts of course, answer feedback we get... But the main focus for us now is mainly Facebook, to get that up and get as much likes as we can. So we can use it as a communication channel.*

To the question of having a social media strategy, Manager of Hotel D states:

*Yeah, I have. I mean I have a written strategy; it is however a bit vague. You know it's all about why and how, but sort of vague. And that is mostly because, (I mean it's for me as well), but more for me to show the top management what it is all about and how to make them understand how important it is. And I also try to have this Facebook diary where I put down ideas and plans of what to post and when etc. So there is a*

*strategy behind it and obviously in my head I know what I want to do and all that. And some of it is put down on paper.*

*We just planned our social media strategy now in January, because it hasn't been that good before. So we need a strategy where we focus first on getting updates on Facebook regularly and then we kind of try to improve ourselves slowly. (Hotel C)*

Nevertheless, most managers do not seem to operate under a clear structure or with explicit instructions when it comes to the handling of user-generated content and social media. The Manager of Hotel J states:

*I am quite new on TripAdvisor, so I'm trying to get acquainted with the whole set-up and the different options that you have for pictures and... So I'm still learning how to use it, whenever I have time I just log on and do a little bit of clicking to see what it's about.*

Other managers express similar views. This shows how underdeveloped and non-existent social media strategies are. Even though the managers recognise the importance of being present on social media platforms, it is not always clear what the hotel actually wants to achieve by this. Social media is also considered to be time-consuming, probably a reason why other tasks in the hotel are often prioritised, especially because assumptions are that it hardly generates any direct revenue. Nevertheless, all the interviewed managers consider the use of social media as important and expect it to become even more important in the future. However, these views contradict the behaviour and hotels put rather little effort into the management of social media. Reasons, such as a quickly changing social media environment

and the actual lack of knowledge about the topic, can explain this to some extent. A comment by Manager of Hotel G summarizes the thoughts of many other managers, too:

*We try to attend to meetings and conferences to learn more about social media. I think it's important. [...] You know, because sometimes it's difficult to know how you are going to use it, it's good to learn how to use it.*

### **Resources**

When asked about the resources put into online marketing, one of the managers of a hotel that belongs to a major hotel chain comments:

*We try not to spend any money on it. That's the thing being in a chain. We try to push them to do it. (Hotel E)*

That the chain is responsible for the online marketing in general might be a reason for little knowledge and interest in user-generated content and social media, too. As mentioned before, the chains are more present on different social media than any of their individual hotels. Some hotels that are part of a chain also receive material about the use of social media in the form of newsletters, guidelines and tips from the chain's social media representative. However, often these guidelines offer recommendations for managers and staff on how to behave on social media sites as representatives of the chain, including its values. The received information does not necessarily include guidelines on how social should be analysed. When it comes to the resources used on social media, the answers varied greatly. Resources were mainly discussed from three different aspects: money, time and personnel. Generally, very



little money was used on social media. This relates to previous literature that shows up that social media often is considered an inexpensive way of marketing. Manager of Hotel E says:

*In money, we don't use nothing at all... But in time that we spend [in social media], we use about half of our time.*

Manager of Hotel B agrees:

*Because it hasn't given us any business, we don't prioritise it, and we don't pay people to do it. We can't have it in a job description, it can't be 10 % of a person's job because there will be costs straight away. To justify that cost, we have to see that it is giving us something. It's not actually an area where we invest money.*

There are also big differences in the amount of time spent on social media and user-generated content, from a couple of hours a week to being online all the time. Manager of Hotel G states:

*I think Facebook is probably two or three hours a week. And then TripAdvisor, I get a message in my inbox when we have feedback, so then I try to answer as soon as possible.*

On contrary, Manager of Hotel D thinks that he/she probably spends too much time on social media:

*It's hard to realistically figure out the ROI [Return On Investment] of spending time on these things. It is important too, but it is also easy to get lost in it... To keep sort of track what's going on in this world, and there is something new every day. So you need to make sure your knowledge is up to scratch. [...] Our website and our Facebook page are always open on my computer and I go and check it probably 10 – 20 times per day. I also have Pages Manager on my smartphone, which I also check when I am not here, in case someone has sent a message.*

In addition, the dominant view among the hotel managers is that keeping up good social media pages does take a considerable amount of time. Manager of Hotel I thinks that:

*If you go on Facebook or TripAdvisor, you also need to make time for it, for working with it. A dead Facebook site isn't helping anyone.*

Also, manager of Hotel J prefers to concentrate on one site at a time:

*I'd rather do the Facebook page properly than to do a lot of other social media, and then do it halfway.*

This perspective might explain why mostly Facebook has taken off as a common social media platform among hotels, instead of Twitter, Instagram or YouTube. Naturally, big differences in time spent on social media might also depend on the number of people involved. The interviewees mostly answered for themselves but in many hotels there were at least two people responsible of dealing with user-generated content. It is worth noticing that different social media sites were often handled by different managers. This includes Facebook

or Twitter accounts, and dealing with feedback on TripAdvisor, Booking.com and others.

Manager of Hotel C talks about the division of tasks in the hotel:

*It's me and another manager. We make sure that we follow up. It's a good thing to be two, because one is always busier than the other. So we have our own responsibilities. He is taking care of the feedback and all that, and I'm taking care of the plans for the future.*

As the resources are scarce, the online world and social media cannot always be prioritised, as Manager of Hotel A points out when the topic of replying comments on TripAdvisor comes up:

*For example today, we don't actually have time to do that. So, we would need to have a person that would be able to have it as a main task. We are really considering to do that.*

In fact, the interviews show that it is very common not to have social media responsibilities in anyone's job description. Yet, all the managers attend to social media on some level as it is still considered important. Nevertheless, most of the managers are hoping to use more resources on this matter in the future. Some managers, such as Manager of Hotel F has noted the potential of the online world and is already in search for social media savvy employers:

*I am going to get a new restaurant manager, and before I would only look at his preferences and what has he done regarding restaurants, and what he knows about*

*restaurants, food and wine. This time I put down in the description that I need somebody that lives in that world, the social media world, more than me. Because even though I'm trying to be on the top, trying to learn about, it's like you just visit this world... One year ago I would never have thought it would be so important, but now I'm not going to hire anyone who is not there.*

On the other hand, manager of Hotel B describes the situation in the hotel:

*It was part of my former job description to do it. I established the pages and got them up and running. Then I got a new job and different responsibilities, so it's not my main responsibility at all anymore. There are few other people who also have admin access to the Facebook page and they can upload things, and communicate and answer, but... they don't do it very often. So mainly I fix it, which is also part of the reason why it's a bit too dead at the moment.*

As social media is not integrated into anybody's work tasks, it is evident that managers' own interest and knowledge of social media have a great impact on how user-generated content is handled. Most of the managers are actively involved with social media in their free time, but for those who are not so familiar with it, it can be a challenge. A manager of Hotel J notes:

*I don't use Facebook much myself so that's the challenge for me... Because I don't think that it's interesting for people to see what I've written there every day. It's difficult for me to kind of see the value in posting a lot of things about our business. But I'm getting better.*

Different levels of knowledge and private involvement with social media among managers can partly also explain the varying level of social media use within the different hotels of our study. Even though there is more than one manager dealing with social media and user-generated content in most of the hotels, the rest of the staff usually do not have access to the company accounts, on pages such as Facebook. The reasons are clear, like Manager of Hotel D notes when discussing the reasons why not all of the hotel's employees have access to the company Facebook page:

*I mean I have knowledge and experience of these things. [...] And obviously I have the whole marketing and communication strategy behind for everything I do for the hotel. [...] People don't understand how important it is to say it this way and not that way, what you put up and what you don't. That's one thing, and also there were a lot of mistakes in the writing and stuff. [...] Because that doesn't make us to look the way we want to look. It doesn't communicate the image that I want to communicate. So I had to stop it.*

Manager of Hotel I has very similar views on the issue, and the rules are strict:

*The official Facebook site is for those who are pointed out to be administrators. You actually need a course, you need to be educated to have the administration role on Facebook. For mostly two reasons; One: to know what you are supposed to do and not, but also to understand that Facebook is of course a main channel for expressing our values, the core values we are trying to establish.*

However, this manager also mentions that the hotel has its own closed staff group, which is used mainly for fun. In almost all of the hotels staff is encouraged to contribute to the online content, conforming to the hotel values. For example manager of Hotel B states:

*I tell them that if there is anything that would be appropriate to have on Facebook, just send me a message and I'll get it out there in 10 minutes. Nothing is too small or too big, we just want to have some sort of activity. So I encourage it, but it hasn't been a great success, if I can say that.*

None of the hotels use consultants, but many of them get help and advice from for example social media experts of their chains or marketing coalitions that they are part of. For example Hotel K is part of one of the chains that gives their employees guidelines on how to behave when it comes to social media at work, but also during free time.

### **Present practices**

Litvin et al. (2008) have identified several strategies of implementing user-generated content: enhancing visitor satisfaction; understanding visitor experiences; monitoring and managing company image; positive references; and analysing competitive strategies. These categories will be used as a framework when summarizing the results of the interviews, and to show how social media and user-generated content are actually dealt with in practice.

**Enhancing visitor satisfaction.** In many interviews, especially TripAdvisor was assimilated with the hotel's internal online feedback system. It seems that user-generated content is often seen merely as a source of feedback, despite the publicity and transparency aspect that the Internet creates. However, examining user-generated content from a feedback perspective shows that all the hotels have integrated online feedback from third-party websites into their daily or weekly operations. However, there are clear differences in how

important and valuable reviews from public Internet sites are considered as. Some of the hotels like to prioritise the feedback from the hotel's internal system purely because of the quantity of comments:

*[Our internal system] is the most important tool because of the extent of replies, we get so many. That's why on TripAdvisor and Facebook we don't get that much, so we don't have that much to work on. (Hotel C)*

Close monitoring of online review sites serves multiple purposes. Naturally, reading negative reviews will help hotels become more aware of their potential problems (Litvin & Hoffman, 2012), something that has also been noted by all the hotel managers of this study. All the hotel managers believe that both negative and positive feedback can be used to improve services and products of the hotel. In many cases, online reviews are well integrated into the hotel processes as the interviewee of Hotel F tells:

*We have a two hour meeting every Monday, going through what has happened during the weekend and what's in the books for this week and what's going to happen. [...] The first thing we do in that meeting is me going through, first TripAdvisor and other comments.*

For all the hotels, feedback on TripAdvisor is taken as seriously as any feedback given directly to the hotel staff. The issues are often discussed in weekly meetings, or if the comment is very urgent, on a daily basis. The answering itself does not take a lot of time, but the process starts from the point when especially a negative comment is received:

*So, I'm taking the feedback and we discuss it in a morning meeting for instance, and we are trying to find a solution on how to deal with it, not only for this [particular] customer. Because that I can do, it only takes me like 10 minutes to send an email, welcome him back with a free dinner, or what it might be. But the important thing is of course to prevent it from happening again and try to find new routines. So that might take a lot of time depending on what it is. I spend 15 minutes on one feedback, and then I leave the case to whoever is responsible for that department where the mistake has happened. (Hotel B)*

Positive feedback, on the other hand, is mainly passed on:

*Usually it is distributed, if possible, to the whole house, if it's general positive feedback: 'Oh, I'm so happy with my stay, the reception was perfect, so nice. The food was excellent, the room was clean and the view was amazing.' This I distribute to everyone; everyone gets a good day. If it's specific feedback about a person, I distribute it to that person, saying 'good job, look at this feedback we've got.' It's a really good pat on the back. And I think that helps a lot because then it's much easier to take the difficult ones at a later stage. So we definitely do that, we use that a lot. All the positive feedback to everyone. I think it's very important for a good working environment (Hotel B)*

**Understanding the visitor experiences.** A large amount of data also allows hotel managers to look for trends in feedback and to conclude what is appreciated and what is not. On the other hand, online feedback and especially eWOM can be approached from a quality aspect too:



*It's often anonymous, and on TripAdvisor they are not even speaking directly to us. So people can probably feel that they can be really honest. So to us, it has the worth of gold, because it's real, true, honest feedback from the people who have been experiencing it. So we do take it really seriously. (Hotel D)*

Consumers, too, believe in the honesty of faceless reviews (Litvin et al., 2008), which also refers to the importance and potential influence of eWOM. In addition, user-generated content should be useful for hospitality marketers, in order to identify the aspects of their service product that are most important to their guests (Litvin & Hoffman, 2012). When discussing the use of online reviews, Manager of Hotel D concludes:

*We always discuss it in the next leader meeting and see if there are things that we can do something about. Maybe things that we weren't even aware of, that were wrong or annoying. So it's really important, it makes us aware of what is not working and what is working, which is also very important.*

**Monitoring and managing company image.** Marketing and branding perspectives are among the most important aspects in terms of user-generated content and the use of social media. Wang, Yu & Fesenmeier (2002) discuss the implications online communities have for tourism marketing, and state that virtual communities have, indeed, broadened the marketing scope. However, according to our findings, there are different views among the managers about the usefulness of social media in marketing. When discussing about online marketing, Manager of Hotel D says:

*Facebook has actually been a really good tool*

On the other hand, the interviewed Manager of Hotel J thinks:

*I wouldn't say that we really use Facebook as a marketing tool in that sense. I post if we have discounted rates, and stuff. I post it there but I don't really see it as a means of generating much traffic. It's more of a way getting people to know who we are, and sort of getting to know our hotel and the history that we have. [...] It's not so much to get the customers on the door.*

Nevertheless, being present on social media sites is a common and inexpensive way in any business to try to raise the awareness of the brand, as Manager of Hotel C puts it:

*So we are now planning on having Facebook posts every week. Of course we reply on TripAdvisor whenever we get something there. And we are also starting to use Twitter more, and starting to become more social in that way. By being more active yourself, you'll probably engage more people that like your page. If you engage them, that's when you get interaction, and get more people aware of your hotel. (Hotel C)*

On the other hand, the main reason often seems to be based on the idea of 'just being there':

*It's something that everybody does, no matter if you sell shoes, cars or hotel rooms. Whatever it is, you have to have a Facebook page. (Hotel B)*

**Positive references.** Encouraging guests to leave feedback on social media platforms is, indeed, crucial. The interviewed managers have noticed the importance of stimulating customer feedback, as ten out of eleven interviewees encourage customers to generate content on third party websites, and to follow them on different social media channels. When asked if they have a feedback section on their website interviewee of Hotel D points out:

*No we don't. We do however try to motivate our customers to leave feedback on TripAdvisor.*

This is often communicated through direct links on the hotel's web page, through little notes inside of the hotel (reception, rooms, elevators and so on), or in the signature of emails sent out to customers who have already stayed at the hotel. Manager of Hotel F explains how the guests are encouraged to leave feedback on TripAdvisor:

*We have a campaign sometimes in the elevators 'please give us feedback on TripAdvisor'. Also the receptionist will comment, if there is someone who is checking out, to complement us. They can for example say 'if you would like, maybe you could give us a review on TripAdvisor'. It's difficult, because not many will do it. Because when they leave here, they have left and everybody is busy. But we try. We could do it even more.*

**Analysing competitive strategies.** All of the interviewed managers state the use of social media for benchmarking purposes. Especially review sites are used for monitoring competing hotels. Several managers mention that they check their competitors' customer comments.

*I obviously read all the pluses and minuses that their guests give them. (Hotel D)*

Often, available management comments are read, too. Following other hotels, allows the managers to compare competitors' review scores to their own.

*The more I know about other hotels, the more I know what we are better at. (Hotel F)*

However, there are no explicit strategies behind these actions:

*We've only looked them up but haven't made any analysis of it. [...] So just for fun in a way, or for orientation, not for strategy. (Hotel C)*

*Just to see what guests had to say about the other hotels. I wouldn't say that we really use it for anything but it's just out of curiosity really. (Hotel J)*

*It's more like on Sunday morning when I wake up and I'm not doing anything, that's when I check the other hotels on TripAdvisor. I never do it in work time. It's more when I have nothing else to do, or when I have space in private life. (Hotel F)*

### **Views on the future**

After conducting the interviews with the different hotel managers, we can state that all managers think that social media and user-generated content will grow in the future. Several managers believe that user-generated content strategies will be developed for the hotel and that user-generated content tasks might be in an employee's or manager's job description.

Manager of Hotel K believes that his/her hotel will use more resources on social media in the future. Nevertheless, he/she mentions: "... we are already doing it pretty well. So we just continue to use our Facebook and Twitter. It's developing all the time". This statement shows confidence in the way that social media are currently treated. One might wonder whether this is too optimistic as an analysis of this hotel's social media pages shows that more could be done. Also Manager of Hotel E believes that the hotel will use more resources on social media in the future. Manager of Hotel G points out:

*I think it's going to be used more and more. Not only because it's inexpensive but also because you can reach a lot of people. People use it for everything. It's an important thing to communicate what you have to offer.*

Manager of Hotel B states:

*I think that pages like TripAdvisor will be very important booking channels in the future, especially for the leisure market. I see that in Norway bookings are mostly done through travel agents... but for the leisure market TripAdvisor will definitely grow. I think Facebook will for most businesses become more like an information page, like a home page, to find about the hotel, not to book and not to advertise. It will be more like if you want to read about the hotel. But I think TripAdvisor will gain market share in the leisure market at least.*

Manager of Hotel B also hopes that his/her hotel will use more resources on these channels and believes that *there is a lot of business to be gained from online advertising and even more in the future.*

About social media in the future and whether employees and managers have social media tasks in their job description, Manager of Hotel H states:

*No, it's not big enough yet. But I think that some of the things that will be. It depends on how big the hotel is and how the hotel is organising that but in the future yes, there will be one person that's sitting, working with social media. Being creative, being specialist in social media. Today it's only a gift that someone has got... We hope that we'll be there somewhere in the future. Because social media, it's so important and it's coming more and more so the level that we are in now is how to get more people to see us. What's the trend, what's the most popular thing to put on Facebook, for example to get more, most of the likes. What do people do when they like something? And Facebook is constantly changing too, because when we started with our own site on Facebook, all posts came automatically in a chronological order. But now it's how popular that post is. So if I have more likes on a picture that I post on Facebook a week ago but I get more likes on it than on a recent one, then it comes much higher and much more in the middle of the view when you open your Facebook. So you have to be more critical what you put on Facebook. (How you are telling things on Facebook, how you do things, what kind of picture you upload, what do people like? Asking questions instead of telling things).*

Even though managers believe that social media will be more important in the future, there is also doubt expressed about the handling of social media matters. Manager of Hotel J is one of the few interviewees that express strong suspicion about getting too personal on social media pages:

*I think it's probably just going to get bigger, it's going to change because it's not always going to be Facebook. It's going to be different channels I think... And that's why it's important for businesses like ours as well. We've been kind of taking a back seat to this entire modern social media thing because we tended to be a bit old fashioned... The thing that I find is that with social media, for a lot of businesses where they have a business website or Facebook site or whatever it tends to be a bit too personal... It's not professional like I would say it needs to be... For me it's important to keep the professional profile and then distance. Keep in mind when your posting things on a business Facebook page that it is a business Facebook page... That's why I'm not very fond of pictures if we take like a staff trip, that we post pictures of people going. It's just not for me, I think we should keep it more to the point. But I think social media is going to get bigger and probably develop into a different direction than I would say it should, because I think it's going to blend and the lines are going to get even more blurred.*

Nevertheless, it being personal and making guests feel at home is often the aim of hotels and one might want to consider that posts can be personal and inviting, without losing classiness or style. However, there is a thin line between the two approaches and in order to secure a certain policy for one's own hotel, it might be essential to formulate a clear strategy for the future handling of social media and user-generated content. If employees and managers have clear job descriptions when it comes to social media, confusion is minimised. The hotel image, and therefore the reputation are pointed in the desired direction and quality can be assured.

### Discussion

This part of our study aims at discussing the findings in relation to previous research and in relation to our research objectives. However, the reader has to keep in mind that management use of social media and user-generated content are novel research fields, and available literature is therefore limited. Nevertheless, significant findings are extracted and discussed.

#### **Finding 1: User-generated content and social media are considered important but little effort is put into them**

Internet and Web 2.0 have become increasingly important in the hospitality industry, for both supply and demand side. Wang, Yu & Fesenmeier (2002) noted already over a decade ago that the impact of user-generated content together with the increase in online travel sales and web-savvy consumers can only grow in the future. All the interviewed hotel managers have noticed this trend, as they consider user-generated content and social media prominent and growing features in the industry. Still, surprisingly little effort and resources are put in practice. All the hotels included in the study employ user-generated content at some level, but these levels vary significantly between the hotels. The level of using resources on social media differs especially in terms of money, time and people. For most of the hotels that are part of chains, the headquarters often deals with the hotel's online marketing in general. But when it comes to the user-generated content, individual hotels are responsible of their social networking accounts or checking review sites. However, all the managers mention that more resources will most likely be used in the future. On the other hand, already now the levels of using resources on Web 2.0 activities vary greatly from hotel to hotel.

In all of the hotels, very little money is directly used for social media. This is seems reasonable, as being involved in social media especially on a mimetic level (e.g. being present on Facebook and Twitter) is an easy and inexpensive way for the hotels to be part of Web 2.0.



But the big differences between hotels emerge when it comes to the use of time. Some of the hotel managers tell that for example on Facebook they use a couple of hours per week, whereas one manager mentions that Facebook is being checked dozens of times per day. In terms of review sites such as TripAdvisor, hotels cannot choose to be visible or not, as they cannot start the conversation with the customer, but only reply comments. But considering the potential influence of these sites, it would be logical for the managers to actively monitor and manage these kinds of websites, too. Though, some hotel managers seem to think that these sites are for the customers and should not be interfered with too much. This contradicts with the literature suggesting that even though user-generated content cannot be controlled, it should be monitored and managed by continuously engaging in dialogue with the customers to protect the brand image of the hotel (O'Connor, 2010).

In terms of staff involved in social media, there are again differences between the hotels. Though, the common feature is that there is only one person, or a handful of people in a hotel having access to social media accounts or possibility to answer on review sites such as TripAdvisor. The managers choose to restrain the power to be able to control the content of the sites and ensure presenting the desired image. The traditional way of thinking and top-down management models collide with the idea of an interactive and flexible culture of social media and can therefore slow down the implementation process and potential innovation (El-Gohary, 2011). Even though the number of people with company access to social media is limited and the responsibilities for different social media platforms are often divided between few managers, it is still not common to have social media tasks in the job description. This leads to the current situation, where social media activity in most of the hotels is sustained mainly through personal interest rather than being derived from business or marketing strategies.

The motives behind the social media use obviously have a big impact on how each hotel is dealing with user-generated content, and how advanced and sophisticated the use is. Presently, many of the managers believe that social media is not as big in Norway as it is in the rest of the world, a possible reason why the use of social media by hotels still seems to be at an initial stage. In the future however, some of the hotel managers consider engaging a person responsible for social media.

In addition, social media are fairly new for many of the hotels, as most of them have only started its use and its monitoring for business purposes within last three to one years. The answers of many managers indicated that they are being novices in the Web 2.0 world, and they are not very confident in dealing with it. Moreover, they are not sure what they want to achieve by the use of social media. Several managers have difficulties identifying social media goals, while generally considering it important to be present on different social media channels. The findings here also reflect the results in Munar's (2012) study on destination management organisations, confirming that social media channels are often attended just because 'everybody else does, too'. Therefore, a structured strategy for online social media platforms would help the managers understand what Web 2.0 can be used for (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011).

**Finding 2: Social media is seen as a feedback channel rather than a marketing or analysing tool**

According to Litvin et al. (2008) user-generated content can be employed for two main purposes: informational and revenue generating; the former being more related to information harvesting, and the latter to marketing. We found out that most of the hotels employ user-generated content for informational purposes, such as product development, problem-solving and understanding the visitor experiences. We identified three main categories of management employment of user-generated content; as feedback tool, marketing tool, and

benchmarking tool. How the management sees user-generated content, naturally affects how it is dealt with. In most cases, the interviewed managers saw electronic word-of-mouth merely as additional feedback to their internal feedback systems. Even though the hotel managers have different views of how comments and posts should be prioritised when replying on for example TripAdvisor, the common practice for all the hotels is to deal with online reviews as a part of the feedback processes. Therefore, user-generated content is fairly well integrated into the hotels' feedback system and online feedback is incorporated into the daily hotel operations. However, the hotels do not store information acquired from the internet, and this can therefore make analysing and implementation difficult. In some cases, the information is stored and processed together with feedback from other channels, such as the internal feedback system.

Traditionally, issues of feedback in the hospitality industry have been discussed in the context of service recovery strategy, a widely researched key area of hotel management (see e.g. Bitner, Booms & Tetreault, 1990; Johnston, 1994; Miller, Craighead & Karwan, 2000). According to Lewis and McCann (2004) there are several stages in service recovery strategies, including apology, correction, empathy, compensation, follow-up, acknowledgement, explanation, exceptional treatment and managerial intervention. As a traditional aspect in the service-focused hospitality industry, it is logical for hotel managers to deal with user-generated content through such well-established models. However, effective service recovery has implications similar to successful user-generated content strategies. Both strategies aim especially at enhancing customer satisfaction; to build customer relationships and loyalty; and to impact profit through positive word-of-mouth (Lewis & McCann, 2004; Litvin et al. 2008). However, the online world has introduced new dimensions, which need to be taken into account, especially in terms of brand and image building.

Nevertheless, branding and reputation building were not among managers' priorities according to the interviews, even though the existing literature suggests that user-generated content should be an essential part of brand building, product development and quality assurance (Dellarocas, 2003). Yet, it should be noted that concerns about brand image might be more relevant on a chain level, still we wanted to have an overall impression of the ways in which individual hotels deal with this issue. Ideally, monitoring and managing user-generated content can offer a competitive advantage to a hotel. However, this requires active monitoring and in-depth analyses to be able to understand all stages of the social media flow: consumer activity in social media; measuring and reporting; improving marketing communication and services; gaining customer loyalty; and motivating customers to contribute even more (Hingley, 2008). In general, many of the hotel managers considered available information about the hotel on review sites to be insufficient to work with. Moreover, the efforts and strategies most hotel managers used for harvesting information from the Internet are undeveloped, too. Hotel managers do monitor review and booking sites such as TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Hotels.com, Agoda or occasionally Google, in order to find out about guest experiences. Other aspects of Web 2.0, such as other virtual communities or blogs, were not mentioned frequently. This implies that most of the hotel managers do not seem to be aware of the possibilities and the capacity of information that can be extracted from online media. Only one of the hotels mentioned having an online tool, letting the manager know what is been written and said about the hotel in online media. Employing electronic word-of-mouth as a benchmarking tool is pursued by all the hotels, and it can be categorised as a part of the analysing process. Then again, applying user-generated content for benchmarking purposes does not usually have a strategy behind it. As no consultants are used in any of the interviewed hotels and as the resources are scarce, the effectiveness of harvesting and analysing information depends greatly on the skills of the managers responsible for social

media. Furthermore, the issue of how the monitored and processed information is fed back to the social media flow, depends largely on the strategic approaches of the hotel.

**Finding 3: User-generated content is not handled from a strategic perspective**

Consumers rely heavily on the Internet when looking for travel information, and online reviews have also been shown to impact hotel room sales (Ye, Law, Gu & Chen, 2011). It would be thus expected that the hotel managers would strive towards systematic monitoring and managing of user-generated content. Yu-Lun (2012) suggests that tourism organisations need to apply a more strategic approach understanding social media features as regards marketing goals, success measures and target market diversification. However, our study reveals that only a minority of the hotels has a strategy for social media. The findings are in line with a study conducted by Munar (2012), concluding that social media strategies of destination management organisations are often devised at an immature level. Also airlines seem to be lacking clear marketing strategies in terms of social media (Hvass & Munar, 2012). Not surprisingly, only two out of all the interviewed hotel managers mentioned that they have an explicit strategy for social media. Nevertheless, even for these two, the strategy mentioned was either vague or it was recently developed, in which case the effectiveness of it was not really tested yet.

Deficient knowledge about social media, eWOM and user-generated content characterised most of the interviews. However, the knowledge level varied considerably among the hotel managers, depending on their background, experience and personal use of social media. Some of the managers had worked with social media before; some have learned about them in their studies, but most of the interviewed hotel managers had no other background with social media platforms than personal use. Munar (2012) points out that social media can be even considered as a lifestyle, which requires a new comprehensive approach by hotel managers as well. Therefore it is crucial that the managers responsible for

social media in the hotels are familiar with this social media culture. It was noted during the interviews that the managers who do not attend electronic social networking much in their private lives, were not aware of how social media can be used as a business tool.

Nevertheless, Web 2.0 is constantly developing and changing, and all of the interviewees recognised that there is a need for on-going learning when it comes to social media. On the other hand, 'learning by doing' was considered the most common approach to acquire knowledge.

Lack of knowledge and experience can also reflect the fact that so few social media channels in the hotels are employed in terms of user-generated content; namely just Facebook, TripAdvisor and Twitter. Many of the managers are not confident moving on beyond Facebook until it is fully mastered. In fact, establishing groups and pages in Facebook is the most typical example of hotels to use mimetic strategy to deal with social media. However, this approach mainly follows the traditional and conservative ways of dealing with social media (Munar, 2011). In the interviewed hotels in general, Facebook and sometimes also Twitter and Instagram are used for promotion by generating stories, news and advertisements. The strategy allows the managers to keep control over the pages. But as the content is mostly provided by the company itself and not so much by the customers, it there is not much contribution in the sense of user-generated content. Also analytic strategy is used to some extent, but only within a prevention approach, meaning searching and monitoring how different social media platforms portray the company (Munar, 2011). It is true that the hotels do not actually have a choice with regard to their visibility on review sites such as TripAdvisor, where the consumers have the power. However, this implies an even more critical importance of monitoring and analysing online reviews, especially because eWOM sources are expected to increase in weight in consumer decision-making processes (Litvin et al., 2008). Also Black & Kelley (2009) state that an increasing amount of customers make use

of online reviews as a primary source when making decisions. Importantly, travel agents, published literature and paid advertising have frequently been substituted with online customer reviews.

**Finding 4: User-generated content and social media are mostly seen as an opportunity rather than a threat**

In table 3 and table 4, we give an overview of risks, challenges, benefits and opportunities that managers associate with social media and user-generated content. The overall impression of the managers is that social media and online user-generated content present more benefits and opportunities than negative aspects for their businesses in the future.

Even though fake reviews are mentioned as a risk, emphasis is mainly put on challenges such as the necessity to attend to social media continuously. This practice is time-consuming, as one needs to act quickly when it comes to feedback and replies. While these matters are mentioned as challenges, previous research has concluded that an active approach towards social media and user-generated content can help a business determine the direction in which to continue and find out where improvement is needed (Dwivedi, Shibu & Venkatesh, 2007). In order to do so, one has to have a system that seizes the information and observes the trends. Litvin & Hoffman (2012) point out that time spent on user-generated content and review sites should be returned in the form of increased bookings. The same authors show that a great number of hotels fail to effectively spend time on social media and review sites. This is confirmed by our results, which clearly illustrate how infrequently and unstructured these matters are being dealt with. Nevertheless, research often shows what management should do, not what it does at current state. It seems that the importance of social media, online review sites and user-generated content in general, is still underestimated by hotel managers.

However, our research shows that benefits and opportunities seem to outweigh the negative attitudes managers have towards user-generated content related matters; the interviewed managers mainly focus on the cost-effectiveness, the additional amount of “honest” feedback they receive, the amount of people user-generated content can reach and its visibility, that is, the marketing perspective and generation of new business traffic. Litvin & Hoffman (2012) conclude in their research that positive online reviews by customers can result in increased bookings. Therefore, the managers’ belief that user-generated content leads to new business activity is confirmed by these authors. O’Connor (2010) mentions the reach that user generated content data can have, as accessibility significantly increases through eWOM and online reviews. This confirms managers’ belief that visibility is a key term in the future. Litvin et al. (2008) support this view, as numerous travellers nowadays use online platforms and other customers’ opinions when choosing travel products. We mentioned earlier that review sites such as TripAdvisor constantly grow and that the amount of online consumer reviews increases day by day. O’Connor (2010) has shown that most reviews can be seen as genuine and of value for businesses. Therefore, our managers’ opinion of receiving “honest” feedback is to some degree supported. On the other hand, managers still have to consider that someone has to deal with these new types of media. In other words, most hotels should probably use more resources on social media, online review sites and user-generated content in general, even if this means higher staff expenses.

Even though inauthentic reviews were mentioned among future risks, the managers who we interviewed generally expressed the opinion that the majority of online reviews can be seen as authentic rather than “fake”. Previous research is in line with our managers’ opinion. O’Connor (2010) states “As the number of reviews grows, the impact of fake reviews falls as they are overwhelmed by genuine consumer-generated content” (p.762). The author also stresses that the biggest hotel review site, TripAdvisor, actually penalises hotels



that post fake reviews, when this is discovered or suspected. Findings from O'Connor's research suggest that very few reviews are suspicious and that the "fake" ones normally can be spotted easily by means of user data such as frequency of visits to the site and message content. The managers included in our study believe that they are not victims of fake reviews and they believe that inauthenticity can easily be recognised.

Several of the hotels in our study encourage guests to give online feedback on TripAdvisor, and to follow the hotel on Facebook and Twitter. This encouragement is done by using both signs and cards inside the hotels, as well as online by linking to the relevant websites on multiple hotels' home pages. Several managers believe that being present on these pages is important. This practice concurs with Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan's suggestion, that business activity can be improved by encouraging good eWOM (2008). Also Litvin & Hoffmann (2012) point out that "Satisfied customers should be encouraged to post positive reviews" (p. 139).

Furthermore, it has been shown that social media sites and user-generated content in most cases are seen as a hobby rather than a necessity that could lead to enhanced business activity. This finding could mean that the field is still too novel for hotel management to have structured and implemented clear strategies and guidelines. Nevertheless, various authors emphasise the importance of social media and online review sites in the service industries (Ye et al., 2009; Park & Allen, 2012; Litvin & Hoffmann, 2012; O'Connor, 2010; Dwivedi et al. 2007;). So our findings do to some extent contradict recommendations on how to deal with these matters and managers still tend to relate too little to these new online trends.

#### **Finding 5: Hotel Managers focus on problem-solving approach**

Our study shows that the majority of managers tend to prioritise negative online reviews over positive online reviews. These managers also seem to want to make sure that complaints are dealt with efficiently and fast. Additionally, they place emphasis on not

leaving customer feedback on negative experiences unanswered in order to make sure a service-recovery can take place whenever possible. Furthermore, these managers want to improve the hotel's image on online platforms. These results are in accordance with the findings of Park & Allen (2012), who suggest that managers with this behaviour have a problem-solving approach rather than a strategic approach. Park & Allen's research also suggests that a strategic approach towards online reviews can mean that a hotel uses online reviews in order to modify or change the way hotel operations are run. Park & Allen also connect the strategic approach to using full-time resources on managing online review processes. None of the hotels included in our study had a clearly outlined strategy on how to deal with online reviews and none of our hotels dedicated full-time resources to these matters either. Therefore, our results concur with the findings of Park & Allen (2012).

Lastly, the different hotels' strategic approaches to social media (if there are any) and response patterns to online reviews vary greatly and clear patterns can in many cases not be found. Also this is in line with Park & Allen's findings; that an "approach to online reviews is all over the map" (2012 p. 71). Park & Allen furthermore state "Even in the hotel industry [...] effective "co-creation" appears to be sporadic and difficult to achieve" (p. 72). Our findings indicate that too little time and thought are spent on topics such as social media and user-generated content.

### **Conclusion**

Web 2.0 has brought multiple new possibilities for both customers and businesses. Consequently, social media and user-generated content have had a significant impact on the hospitality and tourism industries, too. Travellers share their experiences and search for travel-related information online to a greater extent than ever before (Munar, 2011). The customer is more and more in control and businesses start to realise the increasing importance that Web 2.0 practices, such as social media, have for the industry. The hospitality industry is

characterised by intangible products that cannot be tested before purchase (Litvin et al., 2008). This makes travel-related search attractive and even necessary for customers. Through eWOM, experiences and opinions of travellers are spread throughout the online world, ready to be used by everyone who wishes to do so. There is a tendency to leave social media untouched, and hotels do not always manage to deal with user-generated content effectively (O'Connor, 2010).

Our study contributes to science by analysing the way hotel managers make use of social media and user-generated content. The explicit focus on the management perspective is characterised in this field by novelty, and aims at giving a greater insight into the way Web 2.0 practices are integrated into the strategic operations of hotels. Eleven hotels in the Stavanger region participated in this qualitative, exploratory study. Information was gained by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with managers of these hotels. The findings were examined through content analysis, in order to find trends, similarities and answers to the research questions.

The results indicate that even though hotel managers acknowledge social media and user-generated content to be important, little is done in order to deal with these matters. Most of the hotels did not have clear strategies relating to how to handle social media and user-generated content, and replies to customer comments on review sites as well as updates on social network platforms were mainly dealt with on a voluntary basis. Even though chain hotels in many cases had some guidelines on how to behave in terms of social media practices, the instructions were often vague and unspecific. In several cases, the managers seemed to consider review sites, such as TripAdvisor, as mere feedback channels, without considering a marketing perspective. On the other hand, social media platform sites, such as Facebook, were in several cases quite developed, and active communication with customers took place. However, the general impression that we are left with is that the majority of

managers deal with social media features to the extent they see as appropriate. Therefore, in some cases social media and user-generated content are hardly dealt with at all. Even though the managers in general believe that social media and user-generated content will be even more important in the future, recommendations and guidelines are not yet clearly defined.

In conclusion, we believe that management needs to understand the impact that new online trends have on businesses. In order to have a competitive advantage it is essential to deal with the trends that come with Web 2.0. Those that fail to “go with the flow” will most likely see negative consequences, as valuable information goes unseen. Their business misses out, while customers are ready to post, “follow”, “tweet”, “like”, criticise and praise. Web 2.0 comes with opportunities and threats, and a thorough management of these can enhance business activity and minimise complications.

We believe that there are some limitations to our study. First of all, the sample size was relatively small, since response rates to our email inquiry were limited. Secondly, although stating the purpose of the study, we were in some cases met by managers that were neither in charge, nor particularly informed about Web 2.0, social media and user-generated content trends. We believe that answers given by the manager in charge could have been more informative. Lastly, the industry lags behind in terms of terminology, and there was a certain confusion about the definition of terms used in this study.

On the other hand, weaknesses of this study can also be seen as strengths: a relatively small sample means that in-depth interviews could be conducted, and that a decent amount of time could be spent on detailed analysis. Furthermore, this study clarified central terms of the studied field, adding value to the industry terminology. We believe that this research will be of use to the hospitality industry, especially the Norwegian hotel sector.

Further research in this field can give an overview of future strategic implementations. Also, conducting similar studies in other surroundings could be useful for establishing links,

as the novelty of the topic limits direct comparison to previous research. We would recommend further research to concentrate on social media strategy implementation on both the hotel and chain level, possibly with a larger sample. Also, perspectives on both business travellers and leisure travellers in relation to social media can give additional insight.

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## **Appendix. Interview guide**

### **1.) Online strategy**

- How much of the hotel's marketing is done through online channels?
- How important is online marketing for you?

### **2.) Channels, trends and tools**

- Which channels does your hotel use for social media and user-generated content monitoring, responding and data collection?
- Which channels are the most important ones for you?
- Do you provide a feedback section on the hotel's own website? Or do you link to any third party websites on the hotel's own website?

### **3.) Monitoring social media and user-generated content**

- Is it individual work or team-work? Are several departments involved?
- Is staff encouraged to blog and generate online content? If yes, how? (Do you have reward programmes?)
- How often are social media and user-generated content monitored and how much time is used?
- Are you storing/ systemising any information? If yes, which information do you store and how (positive/ negative feedback/ demographics of users)? Do you use a certain programme or software?
- How long have social media and user-generated content been analysed?
- How is feedback responded to? Do you answer to both negative and positive (and neutral) comments? Is negative or positive feedback a priority? Why?

### **4.) Use and governance of social media and user-generated content**

- Is online customer feedback used for innovation and development and improvement of services?
- Do you encourage customers to give online feedback? If yes, in which way?
- Do you have reward programmes/ loyalty programmes for frequent feedback?
- Do you use consultants to help you with social media and user-generated content? Do you use any guidelines?
- Do you see results regarding your activity towards social media and user-generated content?
- Benefits? Opportunities?
- Any risks/ negative impacts?
- Do you believe in the authenticity of online reviews?

### **5.) Competitors**

- Are competing hotels monitored on social media and user-generated content sites? How?
- Are competing management's behaviour and replies on social media and user-generated content sites monitored?
- Is there collaboration with other hotels (of the same chain/ group or beyond?)

### **6.) Conclusion/ Additional info**

- What are your views on the future and social media?
- Personal background, education and previous relevant jobs