

Everyone's a Critic: An Exploration of Yelp.com and Food Media

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“In many ways, the work of a critic is easy. We risk very little, yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and their selves to our judgment. We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. But the bitter truth we critics must face is that, in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so. But there are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and defense of the new. The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations. The new needs friends.”
(Lasseter & Bird & Pinkava, 2007)

Introduction: Everyone's a Critic in the Digital Age

Pixar's 2007 film *Ratatouille* chronicles the efforts of an inexperienced chef and an unexpected culinary talent that together set out to impress famed restaurant critic, Anton Ego. The entire driving force of the film is the pressure to prove oneself and more specifically, to impress the food critic, Anton Ego—a man who thrives entirely on negativity. The character Pixar created is a stereotypical portrait of what one would imagine a food critic could be like. Hard to impress, stiff, bathes in negativity, an elitist, an expert in their field, and gendered male.

Although Pixar is able to capture some of the essence of a critic, the image Ego projects is not the only image of a critic. In fact, everyone today seems to be a critic.

Our online and offline lives are becoming increasingly intertwined (Przybylski et al. (2013), as we have never had so many sites (literally) that depend upon consumer opinion-making for content. Everything from the comments sections of websites and social media platforms to blogging platforms and online review sites has become places for the ordinary citizen with Internet access to share their particular point of view. Many researchers refer to this phenomenon as electronic word-of-mouth (or e-WOM), specifically focusing on the way that reviews online effect online consumer behavior. E-WOM has been studied in contexts such as tourist Twitter use (Sotiriadis & van Zyl 2013) and the effect of product sales on the online seller Amazon.com (Chen et al. 2011).

According to McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips (2013) the Internet has given rise to the megaphone effect, “the fact that the web makes a mass audience potentially available to ordinary consumers” (p. 136). McQuarrie et al. frame their discussion of the megaphone effect around fashion blogs. Social media, including fashion blogs, inherently enable the expression of taste on a public, online platform. This has thus given a select few consumer's privileged status, an audience, and careers that would have been difficult to achieve otherwise.

While it has been long established that a media consumer can be both a receiver and source of communication (Williams et al. 1985), the advent of social media, including the blogging platforms McQuarrie studies, show that ones personal taste, and by extension opinions, are even that much more public and influential. There is cultural, and even possible economic capital to be gained by being a public, and loud voice.

The media landscape is both print and digital, with the popularity of digital media growing everyday. User generated media (or UGM) has been the term used to refer to the social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), blogs (Wordpress, Tumblr, BuzzFeed, etc.), and online review sites (Yelp, Foursquare, etc.) that grow in popularity everyday. Consumers interact with UGMs because they are designed for the consumption, participation, and production of content. Consumers can scroll through pages of content, like content as they go along, and contribute their own content to be scrolled through and liked once again. UGMs appeal to people because there are a variety of motivations beyond the mechanisms of digital media. Motivations vary from person to person but often overlap with the fulfillment of needs established by Katz et al. (1973) including: cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension release needs (in Shao 2009). UGMs encourage interaction and participation to some extent, but it is not necessary for each consumer to do so. It is in this way that UGMs appeal to a variety of people, crossing borders of gender, age, race, class, etc. UGM usage varies because of different motivations, but also provides different people, different experiences often within the same platform.

Not only do these websites satisfy certain needs of consumers, consumers appear to trust these sources more than traditional forms of advertising. According to a Nielsen global study from 2011, 92% of consumers surveyed trust completely or somewhat recommendations from people they know. At 70%, the consumers surveyed trust completely or somewhat consumer opinions posted online. Consumer trust of UGM opinions is greater than other types of advertising online. For example 58% of consumers surveyed completely or somewhat trusted branded websites,

36% for online video ads, 36% for advertisements on social networks, and 33% for online banner ads. As far as consumer online trust is concerned, consumers trust other consumer's opinions above all other forms of traditional advertising (Nielsen 2011).

The effect of online criticism (or word of mouth) is not just cultural, but personal. What brunch we go to on Sundays or what concerts we deem cool enough to check out, are to some extent the result of what is written about that brunch or that band online. Consumers are not only searching for things to collect, they are looking for experiences and connections. While some authors and researchers consider our online relationships to be illusions altogether (Turkle 2012), others consider that now, more than ever, there is urgency for, and potential benefits to our connections made online (Solis 2013).

Online review sites provide a platform for the everyday consumer to express their opinions publicly. In particular, Yelp.com (Yelp) has become an increasingly important nexus of social exchange for businesses. In this particular moment in history when people are suing Yelp asking for compensation for their posts and critics are pondering the effect of the digital age on their craft—this is the time to study such mediums in depth. My thesis aims to examine the phenomena and tease out potential motivations for Yelp usage.

Chapter 1 explores Yelp in the context of the larger food culture landscape. The chapter brings together the wide range of media that can be considered food media. This chapter aims to answer some of my initial research questions such as: Who uses Yelp? How does Yelp work? How does Yelp motivate users to post reviews? This chapter also tackles how Yelp makes money as well as controversies surrounding the website's business practices. This chapter considers the shifts in the food and restaurant criticism industry in the digital age, asking the question: is everyone a critic in the digital age?

Chapter 2 focuses on questionnaire research I conducted in order to connect ideas in Chapter 1 to empirical research. Participants were recruited through the Introduction to

Psychology pool at Vassar College. Students took an online questionnaire that contained a variety of personality scales, frequency measures, and the Media and Technology Attitudes subscale. Due to a low sample size, all of the results need to be considered preliminary at best. Even so, the research showed potential that Yelp was more commonly relied upon than other similar websites, TripAdvisor and Foursquare, although not that different than reliance on Amazon. There was no significant difference in frequency of posting on these four websites, and no significant findings connecting the fear of missing out (or FoMO) to Yelp usage. The main correlation found was an inverse correlation between relying on Yelp and having negative attitudes towards technology. This study provides preliminary empirical evidence that the more so someone is to rely on Yelp, the less likely they will have negative attitudes towards technology. This chapter also contains a brief, but integral literature review on research focused on user-generated media, personality, and research on Yelp. This chapter ends with a discussion featuring limitations and suggestions for future research.

The final chapter of this thesis ends with concluding remarks.

Chapter 1: Yelp and the Larger Food Culture Landscape

1.1 Yelp, An Introduction

Founded in 2004, Yelp.com (or simply, Yelp) began as the brainchild of two former colleagues at PayPal, Jeremy Stoppelman and Russel Simmons. Engineers, and far from business owners, they started Yelp as part of the start-up incubator, MRL Ventures (Rubin 2011).

Yelp is a website that allows consumers to review businesses, discover new businesses, events and featured deals, and communicate with each other and business owners. The top of the webpage includes a search bar where users manually type in what they are looking for near a specific location. For example, users can search for “cheap dinner” near Poughkeepsie, New York, “hair dresser” in Oakland, California, or “bike repair shop” in London, UK. Yelp helps users find local businesses of all types internationally.

Once a search is submitted, Yelp provides users with best matches, highest rated, and most reviewed options, as well as additional features. Users can sort through specific neighborhoods in major cities, distances, price ranges, and other features such as if the businesses are currently open, have free Wi-Fi, have outdoor seating, deliver, serve alcohol, have parking, allow smoking, etc. Each business has its own profile that indicates key information about the business (address, business hours, telephone number, website), the features of the restaurant (what type of food is served, attire, accessibility information, if alcohol is served), and the business’s reviews and rating on Yelp.

Yelp uses a five star rating system, with an algorithm that creates a composite star rating from user reviews. Users, or Yelpers as they are known within the Yelp community, can view the reviews (sorting them according to date, rating, usefulness, total votes, etc.), but also write their own reviews. Each review contains an individual’s point of view on a business as well as the rating they give the business. Each review also features the amount of reviews the reviewer has posted, the amount of friends they have on Yelp, and if they are a member of the Yelp Elite Squad.

While Yelp does not pay reviewers for writing reviews on Yelp (this will be addressed later on), the Yelp Elite Squad is, in Yelp's own words their:

“way of recognizing and rewarding yelpers who are active evangelists and role models, both on and off the site. Elite-worthiness is based on a number of things, including well-written reviews, great tips on mobile, a fleshed-out personal profile, an active voting and complimenting record, and playing nice with others” (“Frequently Asked Questions” 2014).

As indicated by their description, the Yelp Elite Squad are engaged with Yelp on and offline, specifically through meet ups and events. They are real people who write real reviews, and local business owners cannot be Elite. However, business owners can apply to be a part of Yelp's Small Business Advisory Council, consisting of over a dozen businesses internationally that provides insights for Yelp on their experiences as business owners.

1. 2 How Yelp Makes Money and Controversy

While consumers review different businesses for free, Yelp makes money through selling advertisements to businesses that are on Yelp. Through advertising with Yelp, businesses can ensure that their business will appear first in search results, be featured as related businesses, and can even remove competitor advertisements on a business's Yelp page. Advertising packages vary in price, and not all businesses advertise with Yelp. Advertising has been one of Yelp's controversies.

A majority of Yelp's advertising critiques revolve around potentially hidden or deleted reviews, as well as manipulated reviews for those who advertise with Yelp.

Certain restaurants are extremely vocal about their disdain for Yelp, choosing to boycott the website altogether. At the same time, many businesses embrace Yelp by posting “People love us on Yelp” stickers and handing out business cards encouraging customers to review their business on Yelp.

While it is logical that businesses would be critical of Yelp, the users (Yelpers) themselves have also criticized the website. Yelp is free to use, but relies on the labor of Yelpers to fill the website with new content. While Yelp does depend on Yelpers for content, it is assumed that Yelpers like to provide that content, otherwise they would spend their time in other ways. Even so, some Yelpers have decided to take legal action against the website. Most notably is a Californian class action complaint against Yelp (Panzer v. Yelp) for violating the fair labor standards act and unjust enrichment. The plaintiffs believe that Yelp calls its users Yelpers (aka volunteers) in order to avoid having to pay them for the work they do for the website (Panzer v. Yelp 2013). The lawsuit has its own website as well encouraging others who write reviews for Yelp to demand compensation as well (Rosenblatt n.d). Yelp is not the only website to face similar criticism. The website wagesforfacebook.com provides another example that consumers are challenging social media websites for free labor that allows these websites to grow (Ptak n.d). Websites like Yelp are not ignoring these cases, as Yelp has hired an in-house lobbying team to protect website that depend upon free labor and participation against lawsuits such as the Panzer lawsuit.

1.3 Yelp's Demographics

Yelp openly discloses the demographics of their users, which are the people who visit the website, not necessarily those that comment or write reviews on Yelp. 36% of users are male while 66% are female (Yelp June 2013). Yelp users are highly educated, with 57.3% of users with a college education and 14.5% of users with a graduate school education (Yelp Sep 2013). While the typical Yelp user is female, young, educated, with higher incomes—this information does not indicate whether this pertains to users who use versus who write reviews on the website. Even so, the growth of Yelp is immense. Yelp received 1 million unique monthly visitors in 2006 and launched outside of the United States in the UK in 2009 (“The View from 20 Million Reviews” 2011). Today, as indicated by numbers from 2013, Yelp has 117 million monthly visitors with 47

million reviews (“An introduction to Yelp” 2013). How Yelp rose in popularity matters in relation to the larger food culture media landscape, particularly how Yelp was able to move in and capture the attention of millions of Yelpers.

1.4 The Larger Food Culture Media Landscape: Pre-Digital

A Google search for most businesses will provide a link to the business’s Yelp page on the first page of search results. While Yelp is a highly visible key player, what makes Yelp relevant today is that it is situated within a food culture landscape in the United States in which food is not just for consumption, but food is a hobby. This did not happen overnight, but in recent years the combination of technology, entrepreneurship, criticism and journalism, and growing appetites has created a food culture certain people genuinely are passionate about. By food culture landscape I am referring to all types of media that are about, and even serve, food: this includes restaurant guides, restaurant reviews, food magazines, and even the restaurants themselves. This is media that does not just write about the food, but guides the decisions about where to eat as well. It is important to understand that Yelp is situated within in a context of writing about food and the culture surrounding food way before and after Yelp’s introduction in 2004.

One of the earliest examples are the Michelin Guides. The first guide was released at the turn of the century in 1900. The Michelin Guide was founded by two brothers, André and Édouard Michelin who were primarily in the business for selling tires, but part of the brilliance of the guides was that they were aimed at encouraging motorists to travel more and visit locations featured within the guides. The guides included restaurants, rest stops, and places to stay a night or two, and were completely free of charge (Ferguson 2008). Not long after its introduction, a price tag was put on the guide around 1920, and by 1926 a star system was employed with the popularity of the restaurant section. The three-star rating system was introduced in 1936 (Raskin 2013). Even today the three-star rating system implies travel in the descriptions for each star: one star (“a good place to stop on your journey”), two stars (“worth a detour”), and three stars

(“worth a special journey”) (“Selecting our Stars” n.d.). Today, to receive one to three Michelin stars is an honor, but often these restaurants are pricy serving a very nuanced interpretation of cuisine with great attention paid to service quality and presentation. The guide is aimed at a demographic that is, “fairly sophisticated, widely traveled, knowledgeable and adventurous about food” (Ferguson 2008 p. 54). While Yelp is infamous for its negative and poorly written reviews, Michelin reviews celebrate certain establishments that a group of anonymous inspectors determine Michelin star worthy. Their anonymity is key for the Michelin Guide, and anonymity is a theme that will be important for food criticism moving forward.

While the Michelin Guide was not published in the United States until 1968, one of the first publications of food criticism was Duncan Hines’s guides. The name Duncan Hines is now synonymous with cake mixes and bake sales, but at a certain point in time Duncan Hines, the man himself, was known to be somewhat of an authority on food. A salesman, Hines traveled often and knew good spots for pit stops and bites to eat. He wrote a few books dedicated to the many places he visited, specifically in *Adventures in Good Eating and Lodging for a Night*. Hines was able to collect recipes from the places featured in those books, and compile them into *Adventures in Good Cooking and the Art of Carving in the Home* (Hines 1947). While not the first cookbook on American cuisine, this work contains recipes that sweep across the nation: from chicken pie from Southbury, Connecticut, and blackberry jam cake from Zanesville, Ohio to sour cream quail from Pasadena, California. The book contains recipes and illustrations, and instructions about how to eat from all over the country.

Hines wrote primarily from 1935 to the mid 1950s, meanwhile two major magazines printed their first issues—*Gourmet* magazine and *Bon Appétit* magazine in 1941 and 1956 respectively. *Gourmet* is notable as the first magazine dedicated to food and wine in the United States. This reflects a growing interest in learning about food from sources outside of the home.

It was not until 1962 that The New York Times hired their first food editor, Craig Claiborne. Keeping with traditions inspired by the Michelin Guides, Claiborne set up his legacy to the craft of American food writing by establishing an unwritten code of conduct. Robert Sietsema, longtime restaurant critic for the Village Voice recounts Claiborne's method:

The reviewer would set his own name to the work. He'd visit a restaurant at least three times, and each visit would involve a table of at least three or four diners, with an eye to covering the menu as completely as possible, eating some dishes more than once to test for consistency. The publication would pay for the meals, and no free meals would be accepted. Most important, perhaps, was the structure that the restaurant critic remain anonymous (Sietsema, 2010, 42-3).

The impact of Claiborne's contribution to food writing was the highlight of The New School's talk in 2009 aptly entitled "Craig Claiborne and the Invention of Food Journalism". While there were plenty of food writers before Claiborne (most notably James Beard, M.F.K. Fisher, and Clementine Paddleford in addition to a predominately female dominated domain) as Betty Fussell, a food journalist herself and featured speaker at the talk recalled, "Claiborne made talk about food newsworthy in a way that nobody else had and...it was because it became an index of taste at a time when we were as a country flexing our muscles as a new superpower" (The New School 2009).

At this point in time every major newspaper in the United States seemed to have a food critic, and this can be attributed to Claiborne. As Molly O'Neill, former reporter for The New York Times and author explained during The New School's talk:

He brought a rigor to restaurant criticism that we really had not seen before, a kind of scientific sensibility that...got away with some of the fluff and he brought this idea that there was a logic to a restaurant and that

you could grade it on a sliding scale and you could give it a star and that meant something...he also helped create a style of recipe writing, recipe testing, and recipe vetting that had not really occurred before the paper” (The New School 2009).

Around this time there was another pioneer in American cooking—Julia Child. Her cookbook *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, published in 1961, is a classic for introducing French culinary technique in English for American home cooks. Her television program, *The French Chef*, that premiered in 1963 along with programming throughout the 1970s and 1980s made Julia Child a household name and an authority on French cuisine in the United States. At this point not only could you read about food, but you could actually see it too, in the comfort and immediacy of your own home.

In 1968 Gael Greene started writing for *New York Magazine* seducing tales of her sensual and insatiable culinary escapades. It would not be until 1980, when Gael Greene would use the word “foodie” to describe food hobbyists. In 1984, Paul Levy would co-author *The Official Foodie Handbook*.

Amidst a time when food journalism and criticism was emerging as a legitimate craft, a new guide appeared, *The Zagat guide*. The *Zagat guide* capitalized on local knowledge that was essential to the *Michelin guide*, but included the personal and anecdotal opinions of people who were not trained chefs or writers. Tim and Nina Zagat published the first *Zagat guide* in 1979, and it was with the help of 200 or so friends who helped contribute opinions about various restaurants in New York (Raskin 2013). The guide is now created through consumer survey participation. This differs greatly from the *Michelin guide* because instead of a trained and professional tribunal rating what they consider the best of the best in restaurants, the *Zagat guide* does not require credentials and covers all establishments regardless of reputation. While the

reviews are curated, the opinions expressed in the Zagat guide are the result of survey participation.

This was the start of a more collective approach to creating buzz around and writing about food. With the rise of food television and the Internet, more and more sources would emerge for such purposes.

1.5 The burgeoning digital age and potential threat to traditional criticism

Perhaps this is the time to assert that there have always been “foodies”, maybe not called such until the 1980s, but people have always appreciated food, written about food, and talked about food. Heading into the digital era, however, there was a power shift: access to content was becoming more and more pervasive than ever, and it was not long until the everyday consumer had the tools to become their own publishers and distributors of content as well. Meanwhile, a millennial population was embracing both food as a consumer product and the related media that allowed them to read, write, and access great food. In a BBDO Millennials Food Study with 1,000 millennial participants, 48% considered themselves foodies, and 88% used mobile devices when eating out. This is important because millennials represent around a third of the total population, and they eat out often (64% at least once a week will eat out). The study explains the millennial obsession with food best, “food is not just about nourishment. It’s about self-expression and entertainment. It’s about personal storytelling...If their friends like it, they’ll go. If they like it, they’ll share a picture and review of it” (“BBDO Millennials Food Study” 2013).

Heading into the 21st century it was increasing digitalization that enabled the everyday consumer to consume media about food and contribute to conversations about food on an entirely different scale. While those with a television were familiar with cooking programs (Julia Child, etc.), with the launch of Food Network in 1993 there was a channel dedicated to nearly 24/7 coverage of food. Not only did Food Network make food the star, but Food Network made otherwise unknown chefs into celebrities, entrepreneurs and restaurateurs. Most importantly, the

Food Network made food relatable to the average person. Viewers, without any formal culinary education, learned about ingredients they have never used before, how to cook with those ingredients, and how to use an entirely new culinary vocabulary. Food content had never been so visually accessible beyond instruction from generation to generation and print resources. Content was going to become even more close to home with the growth of online media coverage dedicated to food. By 1998 the Village Voice's restaurant reviews were published online (Sietsema, 2010), alongside other publications making the digital shift. Not only were some of the most popular publications moving towards online publication, new online publications emerged entirely dedicated to food.

In 1997 Jim Leff and Bob Okumura founded Chowhound. It was, and still is, an online discussion board dedicated to food (Raskin 2013). Chowhound features recipes, product and restaurant reviews, as well as home cooking tips. With over 36,000 pages of message boards, consumers can find answers to questions ranging from "kid friendly vegetarian ideas" to "lunch in Portland in late May". The astounding part of Chowhound is the variety of questions and the community support for supplying answers. Chowhound users appear to be people who cannot get enough about food—and helping others achieve their cooking goals or find places to eat is second nature. More importantly, Chowhound is an example that the consumer no longer needed to live in or have a close friend from Portland to snag the best tips for where to lunch.

Chowhound is a popular website, but there are a slew of other websites that fill a similar role. eGullet in 2001, Eater in 2005, Restaurant Girl in 2007, The Infatuation in early 2009, in addition to amateur food bloggers, all provide illustrative examples of how online food media could impact, and work with and against mainstream, editorial food criticism.

eGullet is an example from the United Kingdom, a website that is cited as the nexus for launching multiple careers in food (Farrell n.d.). eGullet, similar to Chowhound, is a forum for discussing everything about food. While people continue to post daily, the popularity of eGullet has waned

since both cofounders left, Jason Perlow in 2006 and Steven Shaw in 2012 for new ventures (Shaw 2012).

While Chowhound and eGullet's major attractions are the forums, Eater, released a few years later, is a great example of online food media that combines informative content alongside both editorial and promotional content. Eater contains less than subtle advertising campaigns and many articles are derived from press releases, but Eater is still a great source for national food and restaurant news. In early March 2014, Eater proved its commitment to providing professional criticism through hiring three full-time critics. Many print newspapers are cutting back on budgets and staff for restaurant criticism such as cuts like Linda Burum at The Los Angeles Times, Hanna Raskin at Seattle Weekly, and Robert Sietsema at the Village Voice, among others (Forbes 2012, Raskin 2013, Merwin 2013). Eater, an online source, however is adding them, and has been able to hire some incredible talent. Ryan Sutton previously from Bloomberg, Bill Addison previously an editor and critic at Atlanta Magazine, and Robert Sietsema from the Village Voice, have all been hired recently by Eater (Moskin 2014).

Many of the first online resources dedicated to the food and restaurant industry were professional reviews previously featured in the print version of the newspaper or magazine. This changed with the introduction of blogging. Many can credit Blogger with introducing the masses to the platform, but it was not until 2003 (it is important to note that Google bought Blogger in 2003) when amateur blogging began to expand (Cross 2011). With blogging as a new platform came new writers and amateur restaurant critics. Some amateurs would eventually become professional critics themselves, but it was clear that the unwritten rules for restaurant criticism established back in the days of Craig Claiborne did not seem to matter anymore.

Two examples that are illustrative of this shift are the blogs Restaurantgirl.com and theinfatuation.com. Restaurant Girl breaks the rule that restaurant criticism should be

uncompensated and unbiased and *The Infatuation* breaks the rule that a restaurant critic must be an elite professional.

Restaurant Girl, the creation of Danyelle Freeman, is a blog dedicated to restaurant criticism and other stories about food culture in New York City. Freeman established her blog in 2005, early to the game of online food blogging. *Restaurant Girl* was created to provide a new voice to food writing, one from a younger perspective sans anonymity. Freeman has written a book and was even hired as a professional critic for a bit, but her blog is significant for how vocal she is about her opinions towards restaurant criticism. Her review policy is unapologetic claiming, "If you are open for business and charging your clientele full price, you are open for review" (Freeman, n.d., para. 9). Traditionally restaurant reviews are written after the restaurant has been able to trial their restaurant and make tweaks to their service and menu. This is no longer the case as evidenced by Freeman, and many restaurants now host trial periods in which only family and friends are able to attend.

The Infatuation is a similar website to *Restaurant Girl*, but takes itself far less seriously. Chris Stang and Andrew Steinthal created *The Infatuation* to provide, "restaurant reviews for the people" (Stang and Steinthal n.d.). They like to think of themselves like most millennials, the kind of people you want to ask for great restaurant suggestions. They provide a new perspective to restaurant criticism, explaining:

We're not real food critics, so you're not going to hear any pretentious foodie hobnob from us. If you want those kinds of shenanigans, hit up the NY Times, Time Out New York, or New York Magazine and see what the "experts" think. We just like to eat well and advise our friends of where they should spend their money. In a city with so many great choices, is there any reason to eat mediocre food? (Stang and Steinthal, n.d., para. 2).

Since creating The Infatuation, Stang and Steinthal have quit their day jobs to focus on their blog that provides hundreds of reviews for restaurants in New York City and beyond. They have a mobile application to find places while on the go, as well as a feature called “Friday Fives” which features an impressive list of celebrities and personalities sharing their favorite spots in New York City. They even have a feature called “Welp” which makes fun of Yelp essentially, highlighting poorly written reviews by prolific Yelpers. They are essentially foodies that reject the term, while instagramming their latest conquests at the same time.

Social media websites, like Instagram, in addition to Twitter, Facebook, etc. has proven to be an important index for understanding the sheer popularity of the food and restaurant bloggers. As of April 2014, The Infatuation has over twenty thousand followers on Twitter (Infatuation, n.d., in Twitter) and nearly eighty thousand on Instagram (Infatuation, n.d., in Instagram). Restaurant Girl has around ten thousand followers on Twitter, including chef celebrities and restaurateurs Mario Batali, Bobby Flay and Danny Meyer (Restaurantgirl n.d.). Social media has come of age at the same time millennials have. With Facebook (introduced in 2004/5), Twitter (2006), Foursquare (2009), and Instagram (2010), it is no wonder that food and restaurants, and those that write about them, have grown to rock star status. Prior to social media there was a lack of ways to promote oneself (unless through traditional routes). Blogger opened up the floodgates for blogs to come, but social media provided the platforms to share those blogs. The increased monetization online has enabled certain bloggers to quit their day jobs (like The Infatuation) and now blog full time. It could be argued that social media enabled the Cronut fad in 2013, proving that people were willing to wait, at times hours, just for a taste of the latest food craze.

In early January 2014 NYMag critic Adam Platt’s face was front and center on the magazine’s “Where to Eat” issue. If ever there was a proclamation that the age of the anonymous, faceless food critic was over, this was it. Adam Platt on the cover of the magazine

was intentionally done so to sell more copies of the magazine, but inadvertently conveys an important shift in the importance of criticism. Food and restaurant criticism is not necessarily about prestige anymore, but having as many eyes on a product as possible.

In the context of this shortened version of food media history, Yelp is situated at an interesting time with its launch date in 2004. In 2004, online media was still very new, print publications were beginning to publish online, amateur blogging was growing and social media would quickly be on the rise. Yelp as a product that guides consumers where to consume is not an original concept (hence the Michelin and Zagat guides), but with highly effective SEO (search engine optimization), focus on both online and real life community and social media website architecture, Yelp was able to quickly become the popular source for restaurant and food information all over the globe.

1.6 Technological and social changes and the critic/consumer relationship

The inspiration for this thesis stems from two articles that addressed one of my core questions—does professional criticism have any power if everyone's a critic in the digital age.

The first of which is an article that promotes Yelp, rather than critical of the website in *The Post and Courier* from 2007, entitled "Everybody's a Critic—Online". Seth Sutel explains that Yelp was able to set itself apart because it was online reviews that looked and felt like, "an online social hangout" (Sutel, 2007, p. 7F).

A second article, does not address Yelp specifically, but asks the question—is professional criticism over? It has been three years since Neal Gabler's article, "Everyone's a Critic Now" on *Observer* from *The Guardian*, was posted. Critics are still around, albeit affected by the changes within journalism itself and the advent of social media. Gabler (2011) reflects on a time when critics crafted their own diverse perspective and would even appear on nighttime talk shows, "this was criticism as entertainment but it also demonstrated a genuine dispute over cultural hierarchy—over the claims of informed taste over popular taste" (para. 16). According to

Gabler, the result is that there is increasingly less diversity from critic to critic. Bloggers are not the real threat to the critical hierarchy, simply “dilut(ing) the authority of critics” (para. 22). Gabler points a finger at social networking (including Yelp) as the real threat. To summarize, Gabler explains it nicely:

They [critics] have seen their monopoly usurped by what amounts to a vast technological word-of-mouth of hundreds of millions of people. We live, then, in a new age of cultural populism—an age in which everyone is not only entitled to his opinion but is encouraged to share it (para. 23-4).

While part of the article includes professional critics’ opinions on the topic, the comments section provides a candid and an equally insightful grasp on the shifts in criticism. It is ironic that even in this article, the comments section provides some lively criticism on the topic of criticism, as well as illuminates some pertinent themes. Amongst all of the choices both in print and online, some suggest that the future of the professional critic might be to be the sorter of all of this information. As commenter EdWelthrope puts it, “Go find us the good stuff is surely the future of the critic...the critic as creative is then not far down the road”.

Others still privilege the critic’s access. The critic is someone who is exposed to a variety of experiences, even those they would not normally partake in. This perspective allows the critic to then should be able to accurately judge what is good versus what is bad through experience and exposure. Commenter Scurra notes:

they [critics] are obliged to read/watch/see a wide variety of things, including stuff they don’t like. As consumers, we have the luxury of not having to do that. But the result of that is that the critic does end up with a better understanding of what is ‘good’, or, rather, what they find to be ‘good’.

This has been case for quite some time, but the professional critic may have never have experienced the sheer scale, from professional to amateur content, that critics faced before. Another suggestion is that what matters is following critics which one finds an affinity towards. “The trick is to find a critic who you generally agree with, whether they be paid professional or amateur enthusiast”, as commenter Ringpeace puts it.

Even though many admire and recognize the professional elitism of professional critics, commenters, including Gabler himself point out the reason that anyone can have this debate at all might be enough to demonstrate that the hierarchy has been altered. It can be argued that putting content, including professional reviews, online for free has reduced to value of such content. While consumers once had to physically purchase a newspaper to read a review, anyone can look up what others (professional critics and nonprofessional critics alike) have to say without making any purchases. Participation is more accessible for amateurs, but this devalues the critic’s job. This is echoed in marlovian’s comment:

I don't believe I have to choose between trad and non-trad. The real issue is less whether criticism is moribund than whether newspapers have undermined their critics (and their entire business) by giving away their content online, making their product seem like something it's not necessary to pay for - and by extension not worth paying for.

Mikeydoollee seconds this statement, “The internet has taken away the profit from criticism. And now we all know that ANYONE can write a novel. Anyone can make a film. Anyone can make music. It's all easy, and we all have it in us.” Objectively, there is no reason anyone cannot call himself or herself a critic.

Amateur reviews may be perceived as more authentic or pertinent to the average person as PommieBarsteward comments humorously, “we peasants pay real money to consume the culture we review and poor value for money is punished accordingly”. While it is true very few

restaurant critics pay out of pocket for the meals they review, due to shrinking budgets they have to use their publication's budget wisely. This means that critics have to be pickier about where they go—not too dissimilar from the everyday consumer.

Criticism is about a conversation that anyone can have. As Cross (2011) explains, “no tests or degrees are required to become a blogger...if you want to start your own blog...open an account. It's free” (39). The elitism of certain voices will always matter to some people, but today any kind of criticism or review is appreciated by brands just as long as people are looking at, using, and buying the product that is being critiqued. This is why Yelp is so appealing to the everyday, amateur restaurant consumer. The average person does not have hundreds of followers like *The Infatuation* or corporate advertisers backing their content like *The New York Times*. Yelp provides a space to do so, for free. It legitimizes the perspective of people who have valid (as well as often invalid) arguments. If anything is clear about Yelp, there are certainly a range of personalities that are using (and not using) the website both as a Yelper and as a consumer of the content on Yelp.

Chapter 2: Yelp and Its Consumers—A Survey

Yelp is a part of a larger category of media, user generated media (UGM) that have been the focus of research that overlaps different fields including sociology, communication, psychology, and economics. User generated media refers to, “the new media whose content is made publicly available over the Internet, reflects a certain amount of creative effort, and is created outside of professional routines and practices” (Shao, 2009, 8). This chapter explores the diverse research available on UGMs and personality. In addition this chapter highlights the lack of psychological research on Yelp. This chapter contributes preliminary research that is lacking about Yelp users and their personality and attitudes towards using and writing their own reviews online.

1. Literature Review

This following section reviews previous research related to UGMs, personality and Yelp.

1.1 User Generated Media

While there is a lack of research directly considering online product review websites and its connection to shifts in criticism, there is no lack of research about user generated media (UGM) and online product review websites. Research tackles a variety of websites including TripAdvisor.com (Vásquez 2011, Ayeh, Au & Law 2013), Amazon.com (Chen, Wang & Xie 2011, Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & de Ridder 2011), Twitter (Cross 2011, Quercia et al. 2011, Sotiriadis & van Zyl 2013), and blogging in general (Rettberg 2008, Doueih 2011), to name a few.

Yelp.com is a online product review website that falls under a larger category of online media content that is often referred to in research as user generated media (UGM) or user generated content (UGC). A majority of the research focuses on both the consumer and market effects of UGMs, connecting UGMs to concepts such as e-WOM, or electronic word of mouth.

Research also focuses on the importance of consumer trust and credibility in relation to UGMs as well as the frequency consumers interact with UGMs.

Shao's (2009) research highlights the appeal of UGMs. Interaction with UGMs can be divided into three categories: those that only consume UGMs (read or view but do not interact), those that participate with UGMs (those that interact, share, and organize information), and those that produce content for UGMs. Producers sustain the connection between consumers and participators, because without user-produced content UGMs would not be able to subsist (Shao 2009). It is also integral for UGMs to be easy to use and customizable. Shao concludes that the appeal of UGMs include information- and entertainment-seeking, social interaction and community development, and self-expression and self-actualization.

UGMs enable information distribution on an increasingly vast scale. Word of mouth has always been key for products and businesses. This remains true for online word of mouth, often referred to e-WOM (or electronic word of mouth) in the literature. Online reviews on websites like Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Amazon are included within what encompasses e-WOM.

Sotiriadis and van Zyl (2013) explored Twitter use by tourists for decision-making and e-WOM. They found that three factors mattered when tourists used Twitter as a source for e-WOM: reliability, involvement (frequent posting), and expertise of the user. Sotiriadis and van Zyl explain that it is not only tourists relying on other user's posts on website like Twitter, but the tourists themselves become, "co-marketers, co-designers, co-producers, and co-consumers of travel and tourism experiences" (104) as well. Even so, Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, and de Ridder (2011) found expertise to be weakly related to if a review was actually useful with a sample derived from Amazon.com. Willemsen et al. did find that the more positive the reviews, the more likely the consumer would purchase the product. Ayeh, Au and Law (2013) found that, at least in the case of believing in TripAdvisor, it is not only how much users trusted the source of the review, but also how much the user perceived similarities between themselves and the reviewer.

While user generated media like online reviews may be great for promoting a product, e-WOM can also have negative effects. Vázquez (2011) found that with a data set of 100 negative reviews, a significant portion of the reviews contained information that indicated that expectations were not met. e-WOM may motivate customers to purchase, but if the product received or experience had is not what the consumer expected, a business can expect to read about it.

Business owners overlook E-WOM, but many embrace the potential of e-WOM by passing out business cards with social media information on them or encouraging patrons to review their business or product online. This remains consistent with research that provides evidence that, on Amazon.com, for example, high quality and high quantity of reviews is a positive indicator of purchasing intention (Lin, Lee, and Horng (2011). Additional research has shown that consumers, in the case of online advice communities, find that online advice that is both useful and from a trustworthy source will more favorably intend to make a purchase (Casaló, Flavián and Guinalú 2010). Ye, Law, Gu and Chen (2010) found, with data from online travel agencies in China, that more online reviews boosted online bookings. For their sample, when travel review ratings increased by ten percent, online bookings increased by over five percent. It is implied that more reviews meant more real life purchases. Thus consumer feedback becomes quantifiable online (Cross 2011).

UGMs like online review websites and blogging have contributed to a less hierarchical system, in which consumers can be both producers and consumers. Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) call this prosumption (production and consumption). They assert that prosumption is not something that emerged with social media, but has been integrated into everyday life in which consumers are put to work. Examples include self-service gas stations, pregnancy tests, and bagging, scanning and swiping ones credit card for groceries at a supermarket. We have been active participants in the production of many of the activities we participate in and experiences we

have, but the centrality of production has been even more so the focus with social media. No one pays to use Yelp.com, yet people actively contribute their own content to the website at the same time producing and consuming. The appeal is that content on Yelp.com is abundant and it is free. Even so, the appeal of UGMs including Yelp varies from person to person. We can contribute different attitudes towards UGMs to be a function of different individual differences and personalities.

1.2 UGMs and Personality

The Big Five personality traits include: extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability/neuroticism, and openness. Extraversion is associated with sociability and entertainment/excitement seeking, neuroticism with impulsiveness and emotional instability, agreeableness with trust and altruism, conscientiousness with ambition and persistence, and openness with adventure and imagination (Quercia et al. 2012). The psychological community has agreed that these five domains incorporate many of the personality traits that most individual differences fit into (McCrae and Costa in Correa et al. 2013).

My study did not rely on or use the Big Five, but the Big Five is the most popular framework through which researchers have explored the connection between UGMs and personality. The following studies focus on UGMs that are not Yelp, but provide insight that can be applied to research about Yelp.

Previous research has shown that different personalities interact with and enjoy the Internet in different ways (Orchard and Fullwood 2010). In particular, emotional stability/neuroticism, openness, and extraversion are the domains most significant to digital media use (Ross et al. 2009, Zywicki & Danowski 2008, Correa et al. 2013).

Facebook is arguably one of the most popular UGMs (with over a billion users worldwide) and has been the focus of many studies researching the website within the Big Five personality framework. In respect to extroversion studies have shown that those with this trait are more likely

to have more friends on the website (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2008) and be more engaged with Facebook (Quintelier and Theocharis 2012). Other studies show that extroverts do not necessarily have more Facebook friends (Ross et al 2009) as Facebook is not a substitute for social activity for extraverts, but perhaps their popularity in real life reflects popularity online (Quercia et al. 2012). Those who are more open to experiences will include more personal information in their Facebook profiles (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2008), will be more politically engaged on Facebook (Quintelier and Theocharis 2012), and will be more open to using Facebook in order to be social (Ross et al. 2009). For those with high neuroticism, the wall was their favorite part of Facebook, while low neuroticism liked the photographs (Ross et al. 2009). Even so, those with high neuroticism have been shown to post photos, although less likely to upload many (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2008). Research about agreeableness and conscientiousness relationship with Facebook use is less conclusive. Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2008) found that those with high conscientiousness had more friends on Facebook and used the picture upload feature less. This study did not find agreeableness to be correlated with amount of Facebook friends or the picture upload feature. Similarly, Ross et al. (2009) found that correlations between Facebook and conscientiousness and agreeableness were not significant. We can assume Yelpers exhibit similar variety in personality and Yelp use.

Correa et al. (2013) looked at social media use in the broader sense and its relationship to three domains: openness, emotional stability, and extraversion. Those who were more open to experiences, more neurotic, and more extroverted were more likely to use social networking websites. Correa et al. suggested that those with these characteristics might do so because they are more open to using such platforms, use social media to calm anxieties, and use social media as a means to communicate and socialize, respectively. In an early study Correa et al. (2009) found, out of all five domains, that extraversion strongly predicted social media use. Correlations between genders and ages differed as well. Women were more likely to use social media than

men when they were more extraverted and open to experience (Correa et al. 2009). The same study also considered age differences, splitting their sample size between participants ages 18-29 and participants 30 years and older. Extraversion was significant for each sample, while openness was related for only the 30 years and older sample. Emotional stability was negatively associated for the 30 years and older sample, while both emotional stability and openness were not significant for the sample ages 18-29.

While all of these studies provide an integral connection between personality and UGMs, they do not directly make connections between the intention to write a review on intermediaries (like Amazon or eBay) and Big Five personality domains. Picazo-Vela et al (2010) predicted that those on the higher end of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness would all predict an intention to write a review. Neuroticism was the only domain predicted to have a negative effect on intention to write a review. Alike previous research, Picazo-vela et al. found that agreeableness was not statistically significant. Unlike previous research openness and extraversion were both unrelated to the intention to write a review. Both neuroticism and conscientiousness were significant predictors of the intention to write a review.

None of these studies tackle the website Yelp however.

1.3. Current Research on Yelp

Research specifically about Yelp pays close attention to the reviews themselves or the economic benefits (or deficits) from Yelp reviews and star ratings for businesses. The following is a sample of the research on Yelp, which demonstrates the lack of research that connects Yelp and Psychology.

Byers, Mitzenmacher and Zervas (2012) tracked Yelp ratings after local businesses offered a Groupon deal. Groupon is considered a “deal-of-the-day” website offering discounted prices on local services, including meals at restaurants. Byers et al. found that after offering a Groupon deal, the businesses they studied experienced a significant decline in their Yelp star

rating. Star rating is key because Anderson and Magruder (2012) found that when restaurants received an extra half-star rating they would book all of their reservations approximately fifty percent of the time.

Chen and Lurie (2013) cite previous research that indicates that negative reviews have more of an impact on online word of mouth. Positive reviews on websites such as Yelp are seen to reflect the reviewer's experience, while negative reviews are seen to be indicative of the product experience. Chen and Lurie test this hypothesis by examining Yelp reviews looking specifically at temporal cues. When temporal cues (e.g. today, just got back, tonight) are indicated in the review, the negative bias towards positive reviews diminishes.

Luca and Zervas (2013) focused on a sample of Boston restaurants, finding that there are certain incentives for business owners to commit review fraud on websites such as Yelp. They cite that sixteen percent of the reviews on Yelp are not from actual reviewers, but may have been written to salvage the business's reputation or to compete alongside competitors. In most situations fake reviews are more likely written when a non-national chain restaurant has poor quality and quantity. Yelp's algorithm however does an adequate job eliminating of these fake reviews.

Research focusing on the reviewers themselves is limited. An earlier study by Wang (2010) hypothesized that those that use Yelp (known as Yelpers) may use the website as another platform to demonstrate and share their self-perceived knowledge or intelligence. This is an additional motivation for writing reviews for quantity. As we know, Yelp is supported through its prolific users—and users seem to actively enjoy contributing.

2. The Present Study

To understand why someone would want to use a review on a website like Yelp in the first place, Hicks et al. (2012) used a uses and gratifications framework to explore why people visit and write reviews on Yelp. Most research on Yelp explores how Yelp reviews impact businesses

economically—there is little research that pays attention to the motivations and individual differences that propel Yelp usage. Thus, this research is quite important to my research.

Hicks et al. conducted an online survey recruiting Yelp users. A majority of the participants read reviews rather than wrote reviews. Hicks et al. examined five potential motivations for Yelp usage, including: interpersonal utility, pastime, information seeking, convenience, and entertainment. This study found that the strongest motivator for Yelp usage was information-seeking (using Yelp to research and find out about businesses). This is consistent with self-reported usage in the sample. With only 28 participants writing reviews, users for Yelp would more likely represent the sample that reads reviews. After information seeking, the strongest motivator for Yelp usage was entertainment, convenience, interpersonal utility, and finally, to pass time. Yelp users visit the website to fill important, but different needs.

In contrast, Kuehn (2013) analyzes Yelp through a theoretical perspective. While web users have a myriad of websites to choose from, what appears like a democratic choice in consumption is, according to Kuehn, an illusion of empowerment. Websites like Yelp reinforce the ability for the consumer to make choices that are seemingly detached from elitism, critics, and advertisers. Yelp appears to be an online substitute for word of mouth information from a good friend. Even so, Yelp is not too far from these institutions. Yelp has its own advertising and promotes businesses that choose to participate in their advertising campaigns.

Kuehn highlights the specific ways in which Yelp fetishized the ability to consume thus encouraging users to participate. Unlike other food and restaurant themed blogs, Yelp is a social media website. Each user can have their own profile that not only catalogues their reviews, but even their likes and dislikes. Experiences in real life are easily translated into the formatting on Yelp, creating a cycle in which experiences are not just lived, but circulated from real life value into digital platforms (Kuehn 2013).

My interest in Yelp overlaps the work of Hick et al. (2012) and Kuehn (2013). Researchers have mostly focused on online media with respect to the Big Five, but to this researcher's knowledge there is no study that explicitly studies Big Five personality domains and Yelp.com. Although the Big Five is a great psychological framework to work with, as indicated from previous research on online media and the Big Five, some domains correlate more with online media use than others. In addition, there are no studies, that I am aware of, that study personality traits that may be a part of a Big Five personality domain, but are more pertinent traits relating to UGMs like Yelp. The aim of my survey was to tackle this lack of research.

To my knowledge, reliance on Yelp versus other comparable websites (Amazon, TripAdvisor, and Foursquare) has not been the focus of empirical, psychological research. Consumers often use these websites in order to gain insight about a product or a business before visiting. Even Pete Wells, food critic for The New York Times, uses Yelp and other similar website all of the time to scope out new restaurants with otherwise little critical buzz (The New York Times 2012). When searched for on Google, the Yelp page is one of the first webpages to appear for most businesses. Keeping these thoughts in mind, I predict that:

Hypothesis 1: Consumers will rely on Yelp more so than Amazon, TripAdvisor, and Foursquare when making consumer decisions (e.g. which restaurant to eat at).

A related question is which website consumers choose to post their own reviews. In 2013, Yelp had 117 million monthly visitors, but 47 million reviews ("An introduction to Yelp" 2013). 47 million reviews is certainly a large sum per month, but clearly more people are reading that content on Yelp than contributing to the content. With this in mind, I predict that:

Hypothesis 2: Consumers will post reviews on Yelp less so than they rely on Yelp when making consumer decisions, but will review on Yelp more so than Amazon, TripAdvisor, and Foursquare.

The fear of missing out (or FoMO) is defined as, "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent FoMO is characterized by the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing" (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan,

& Gladwell, 2013, 1841). Przybylski et al. developed a 10-item, 5-point scale. The eighth item of the scale is especially pertinent to connecting FoMO to online media behavior, “When I have a good time it is important for me to share the details online (e.g. updating status”.

The term itself, FoMO, has seemingly emerged within the social media zeitgeist, so it is a measure that naturally fits with studying online media practices in conjunction with Yelp. There is a lack of psychological or media studies research dedicated to FoMO despite the term’s buzz. As far as I am aware, Przybylski et al. were the first to empirically study FoMO.

In a series of three studies, Przybylski et al. (2013) provided key data about FoMO. The first study was a first of its kind assessment of FoMO. Participants completed a self-report measure that provided evidence that people experience low to high levels of FoMO. The second study found that male and younger participants reported higher levels of FoMO. Amongst the older portion of the sample there were no clear gender differences in FoMO. This may be because older generations tend to engage with social media less than their younger counterparts. Those who were less satisfied in terms of mood, life satisfaction and the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness reported higher levels of FoMO. The second study also found that these unsatisfied factors led to increased social media engagement. This provides evidence between the connection between increased social media engagement and increased FoMO. The third study connected FoMO directly to a specific social media website (another UGM), Facebook. Those with higher levels of FoMO were linked to greater Facebook engagement during specific times of the day. These times of the day included high use during university lectures and when driving.

Developing my hypothesis from this key study, it can be hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3: Those who have greater self-reported fear of missing out will have greater reliance on Yelp. Conversely, those with less self-reported fear of missing out will have less reliance on Yelp.

Rosen, Whaling, Carrier, Cheever, and Rokkum (2013) developed a Media and Technology Usage and Attitudes Scale to provide a way to empirically study media usage and attitudes that was based on frequency of use, rather than self-reports of time spent. The final scale is 60-items, but for my purposes, I will focus on the 16-item Attitudes subscale. The 16-item subscale consists of four subscales: positive attitudes towards technology, negative attitudes towards technology, anxiety/dependence on technology, and task switching preference. Rosen et al. also used Facebook. Those who used Facebook were more likely to have more positive attitudes (thus less negative attitudes) towards technology. Even so, they were also more likely to have greater anxiety when unable to check their technology. Between Facebook users and nonusers there was no difference for task switching (or multi-tasking) preference. Rosen et al. devised the scale to be usable for new technology as they emerge, thus it works with research on other UGMs, like Yelp:

Hypothesis 4: Those who have positive attitudes towards technology will have great reliance on Yelp. Conversely, those with negative attitudes towards technology will have less of a reliance on Yelp.

2.1 Participants and Procedure

To test the hypotheses a questionnaire was constructed. Questionnaires were completed online by students enrolled in the Introduction to Psychology courses at Vassar College. Participants were expected to complete the survey within a 35-40 minute period on their own personal computers. Participants received one unit of credit for their participation. They were informed that they could withdraw their participation in the project without prejudice or penalty of any kind and that their data would be archived for future use.

Data was collected in Spring 2014 from undergraduate students. Although undergraduate students are not the primary demographic of Yelp users, for this study I believed they would be a good fit because they are passionate and vigorous Internet users. Many of the studies featured in this thesis use research with undergraduate participants. Additional research demonstrates that

young people (which make up the undergraduate population) are avid Internet users (McGann 2005, Lim et al. 2006, Jones & Fox 2009).

24 students participated in the study. 17 of the participants identified as female, and 7 of the participants identified as male.

2.2 Measures*

Measures are described in the order in which they appeared on the online survey.

The Desirability of Control

Burger & Cooper's (1979) 20-item measure of desirability of control was included. The scale includes items such as "I enjoy being able to influence the actions of others" and "Others usually know what is best for me". Responses were made on a 7-point Likert scale. This was included because perhaps those that use Yelp want to be in more control over the content they read about restaurants and other businesses. Those that write reviews may desire to be in control of the content others read.

The Need to Belong

Leary, Kelly, Cottrell & Schreindorfer's (2013) Need to Belong scale was included to provide a scale that tapped into certain anxieties that relate to online media engagement. The scale used is a ten-item, 5-point scale that includes items such as "I want other people to accept me" and "I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me".

The Need for Cognition

Cacioppo and Peet's (1982) Need for Cognition scale was used to touch on a different motivation for Yelp usage. While an individual may want to be in control of their media and aim to belong, they may also enjoy thinking and engaging with thinking. Perhaps people who engage with Yelp are passionate thinkers. The Need for Cognition scale is an 18-item, 5-point scale that

* This section lists each measure that was a part of the questionnaire. Many of the scales included here were not analyzed. They may be addressed with the use of the same questionnaire with a larger, different sample. For reference, the Appendix at the end of the thesis contains the questionnaire in full that was used for this study.

includes items such as “I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking” and “I only think as hard as I have to”.

Curiosity and Exploration

Kashan, Rose & Fincham’s (2004) scale provided an additional scale about exploration and curiosity. It is a 7-point, 7-item Likert scale with items such as “Everywhere I go, I am out looking for new things or experiences” and “I would describe myself as someone who actively seeks as much information as I can in a new situation”. This scale was included because Yelp users could potentially just be curious people.

The Fear of Missing Out

The Fear of Missing Out scale (FoMOs) is explained in finer detail earlier in this paper. This scale was key to the final analysis and conclusion for this research. The 10-item, 5-point scale was developed by Przybylski et al. (2013). It contains items such as “I fear others have more rewarding experiences than me” and “It bothers me when I miss an opportunity to meet up with friends”. The eighth item of the scale is especially pertinent to connecting FoMO to online media behavior, “When I have a good time it is important for me to share the details online (e.g. updating status”.

Online Media Frequency Measures

The online media frequency measures were created to determine how often participants used certain online media in different ways. All items in this section were scored on a 7-point scale from “never” to “all of the time”. There were four sections. The first section asked how often, if ever, did participants visit or use various online media. Included in this first section were websites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The second section uses the same online media items, minus email, but asks how often, if ever, did participants post on the listed websites. Posting was defined to include status updates, pictures, comments, and videos. The third section asked about reliance on the websites Amazon, Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Foursquare in order to make consumer

decisions. Participants were able to include another review website if they wanted. Consumer decisions was described as “what restaurants to eat at, what book to buy, hotel to stay in, etc” for the participants. In the fourth section, participants were asked if they ever post their own reviews for the same set of websites. They were able to include another review website if they wanted in this section as well.

Media and Technology Attitudes scale

The Media and Technology Attitudes scale (Rosen et al. 2013) is a subscale of a larger Media and Technology Usage scale that consists of 60 items in total. For my research, the scale was a 7-point scale from 1, as never, to 7, as all of the time. The Attitudes subscale consists of 16-items and is comprised of four subscales: 6-items on Positive Attitudes Toward Technology, 3-items on Anxiety About Being without Technology or Technology Dependence, 3-items on Negative Attitudes Toward Technology, and 4-items on Preference for Task Switching. Scale items include statements ranging from “I feel that I get more accomplished because of technology” to “New technology makes life more complicated”.

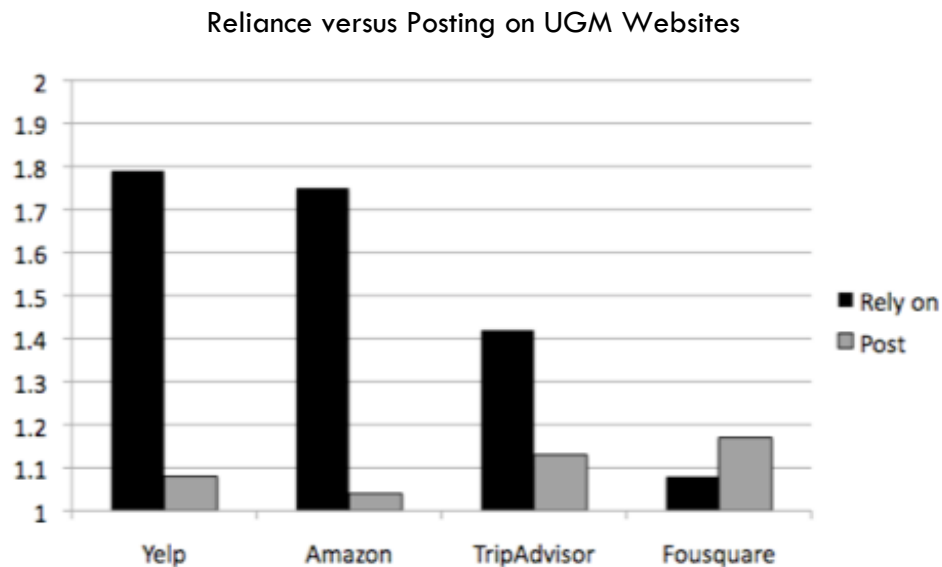
2.3 Results

Repeated measures ANOVA was used to examine relative frequency of relying on and posting for four key UGM websites. The four websites examined included Yelp, Amazon, TripAdvisor, and Foursquare.

There were significant differences in frequency of relying on these websites, $F(3, 21) = 9.82, p < .001$. Specifically, Yelp was more commonly relied upon than either TripAdvisor or Foursquare, although it was not different from Amazon. Foursquare was the least commonly relied upon. Thus Hypothesis 1 is partially supported.

Figure 1 shows the mean scores for all four websites. The black bar represents means for relying on the website, and the grey bar represents means for posting on the website. For Yelp, Amazon and TripAdvisor participants in the sample relied on the respective websites more

frequently than they posted on the websites. FourSquare was the only website that the sample reported posting on more frequently than relying on. Hypothesis 2 was partially supported as well. While participants post on Yelp less so than they rely on Yelp, participants post reviews on Foursquare and Amazon more so than Yelp. While all four websites have the feature to provide an online review, the way users use each website varies slightly. This could be why we see this pattern. It is also important to note that even though there are differences in frequency, these differences are very small. All of the means fall between 1 and 2. This means that the average of the scores reported by the participants fall between never and once a month. In this sample, reliance on and posting on these four websites is very low.



[Figure 1 (n=24)]

There was no significant difference in frequency of posting on websites.

Paired t-tests reveal that for Yelp, Amazon, and TripAdvisor, participants were significantly more likely to rely on than post**:

Yelp: $t(23) = 4.30, p < .001$

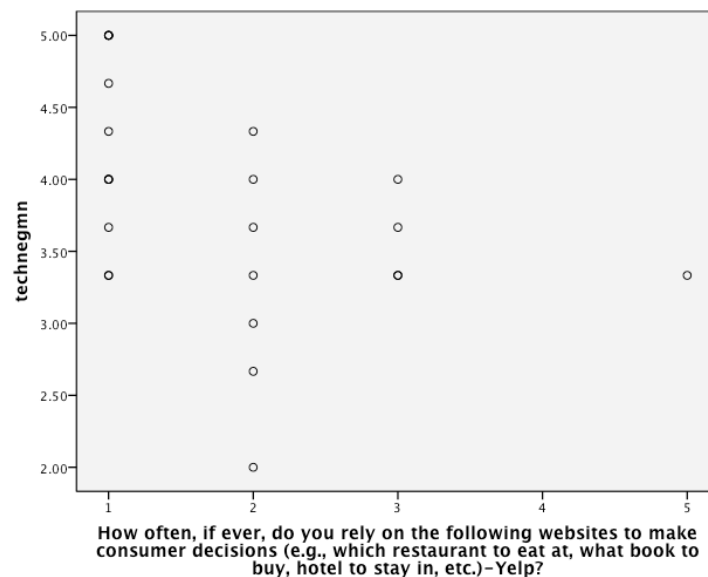
Amazon: $t(23) = 4.62, p < .001$

TripAdvisor: $t(23) = 2.60, p < .05$

** Foursquare showed no significant difference because relying on score was already quite low.

No significant correlations emerged for links between FoMO, Media and Technology Attitudes, and Yelp use except for an inverse correlation between relying on Yelp and having negative attitudes toward technology, $r(24) = -.43, p < .05$. Figure 2 shows the inverse correlation in the preliminary findings. While Hypothesis 3 is unsupported by this study, Hypothesis 4 is tentatively confirmed.

Relying on Yelp and Negative Attitudes Towards Technology



[Figure 2 (n=24)]

Due to the low sample size, all results need to be considered preliminary at best.

2.4 Discussion

The present study is the first, to my knowledge, to empirically examine Yelp, FoMO, and attitudes towards technology. This study provides preliminary research that needs to be taken with a grain of salt considering the low population in the sample. It is intuitive that people will have positive attitudes towards technology if they rely on certain media. Even so, this research suggests that people with greater positive attitudes toward technology would be more likely to rely on Yelp. Yelpers enjoy using Yelp, otherwise they would not spend the time they do on the website. Their time would be better spent on other endeavors.

For the particular sample featured in this thesis, however, use of UGMs like Yelp, Amazon, TripAdvisor, and Foursquare was extremely low. A majority of the participants used these services between never and once a month. This could be because the sample size consisted of undergraduate students. At Vassar College, a majority of students live on campus and are on the meal plan. This might mean that most students do not have to leave campus very often. This would mean use of Yelp and TripAdvisor would be minimal. In general, Amazon is popular for online shopping. Students have been known to use Foursquare to check into the various buildings on campus. Even so, the sample in this study was not close to representative of the Vassar population, let alone, an ideal population representative of a national population. For future research, I would recommend collecting more data from a non Vassar College population.

In addition I would change the wording for one particular question on the questionnaire. A key question used in my study was "How often, if ever, do you rely on the following websites to make consumer decisions (e.g. which restaurant to eat at, what book to buy, hotel to stay in, etc.)". This question was the prompt asking about reliance on Yelp, Amazon, TripAdvisor, and Foursquare. The use of the word "rely" may have implied less agency. The word "use" could be substituted.

The sample size limited my ability to analyze a majority of the data and many scales included in the questionnaire were dropped off from further analysis. Future work should explore Yelp and other individual differences including the need to belong, the need for cognition, curiosity and exploration, and the desirability of control, among others. Yelp users are unique, and it would be fruitful for researchers to go about studying them in as many ways as possible.

Future research may also want to differentiate findings between people of different genders, ages, educational levels, races, and classes. My sample was not large enough to do so.

Conclusion: A Threatened Industry: The Shifting Face(s) of Criticism

This thesis opened with a quote from a film. Like implied in the quote, I believe that professional criticism is not threatened by UGMs, it is joined by UGMs. This means that UGMs like Yelp are not inherently bad or good, but rather our hierarchical structures are different. Professional criticism may not carry the same weight as it did in the past, but that does not mean that the opinions of professional critics are not decision makers and culture makers. Yelpers, bloggers and online commenters will not take over professional criticism. They will contribute millions of new opinions and ideas. Taking the time to study them will bring researchers closer to an understanding about the legitimacy of their arguments. Perhaps even professional critics will embrace the new experiences they are about to find out online.

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Appendix

Research Questionnaire

Below you will find a series of statements. Please read each statement carefully and respond to it by expressing the extent to which you believe the statement applies to you. For all items, a response from 1 to 7 is required. Use the number that best reflects your belief when the scale is defined as follows:

- 1 = The statement does not apply to me at all
- 2 = The statement usually does not apply to me
- 3 = Most often, the statement does not apply
- 4 = I am unsure about whether or not the statement applies to me,
or it applies to me about half the time
- 5 = The statement applies more often than not
- 6 = The statement usually applies to me
- 7 = The statement always applies to me

1. I prefer a job where I have a lot of control over what I do and when I do it.
2. I enjoy political participation because I want to have as much of a say in running government as possible.
3. I try to avoid situations where someone else tells me what to do.
4. I would prefer to be a leader than a follower.
5. I enjoy being able to influence the actions of others.
6. I am careful to check everything on an automobile before I leave for a long trip.
7. Others usually know what is best for me.
8. I enjoy making my own decisions.
9. I enjoy having control over my own destiny.
10. I would rather someone else take over the leadership role when I'm involved in a group project.
11. I consider myself to be generally more capable of handling situations than others are.
12. I'd rather run my own business and make my own mistakes than listen to someone else's orders.
13. I like to get a good idea of what a job is all about before I begin.
14. When I see a problem, I prefer to do something about it rather than sit by and let it continue.
15. When it comes to orders, I would rather give them than receive them.
16. I wish I could push many of life's daily decisions off on someone else.
17. When driving, I try to avoid putting myself in a situation where I could be hurt by another person's mistake.
18. I prefer to avoid situations where someone else has to tell me what it is I should be doing.
19. There are many situations in which I would prefer only one choice rather than having to make a decision.
20. I like to wait and see if someone else is going to solve a problem so that I don't have to be bothered with it.

[Burger, J. M., & Cooper, H. M. (1979). The desirability of control. *Motivation and Emotion*, 3, 381-393.]

Indicate the degree to which each statement below is true or characteristic of you on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3 = moderately, 4 = very, 5 = extremely).

1. If other people don't seem to accept me, I don't let it bother me. (R)
2. I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me.
3. I seldom worry about whether other people care about me. (R)
4. I need to feel that there are people I can turn to in times of need.
5. I want other people to accept me.
6. I do not like being alone.
7. Being apart from my friends for long periods of time does not bother me. (R)
8. I have a strong "need to belong."
9. It bothers me a great deal when I am not included in other people's plans.
10. My feelings are easily hurt when I feel that others do not accept me.

Note. Respondents indicate the degree to which each statement is true or characteristic of them on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3 = moderately, 4 = very, 5 = extremely). (R) indicates that the item is reverse-scored.

[Leary, M., Kelly, K., Cottrell, C. & Schreindorfer, L. (2013). Construct validity of the need to belong scale: mapping the nomological network. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 95, 6, 610-624]

Instructions: For each of the statements below, please indicate to what extent the statement is characteristic of you. If the statement is extremely uncharacteristic of you (not at all like you) please write a "1" to the left of the question; if the statement is extremely characteristic of you (very much like you) please write a "5" next to the question. Of course, a statement may be neither extremely uncharacteristic nor extremely characteristic of you; if so, please use the number in the middle of the scale that describes the best fit. Please keep the following scale in mind as you rate each of the statements below: 1 = extremely uncharacteristic; 2 = somewhat uncharacteristic; 3 = uncertain; 4 = somewhat characteristic; 5 = extremely characteristic.

1. I would prefer complex to simple problems.
2. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.
3. Thinking is not my idea of fun. a
4. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.
5. I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is a likely chance I will have to think in depth about something."
6. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours.
7. I only think as hard as I have to. a
8. I prefer to think about small, daily projects to long-term ones?
9. I like tasks that require little thought once I've learned them.
10. The idea of relying on thought to make my way to the top appeals to me.
11. I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.
12. Learning new ways to think doesn't excite me very much.
13. I prefer my life to be filled with puzzles that I must solve.
14. The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me.
15. I would prefer a task that is intellectual, difficult, and important to one that is somewhat important but does not require much thought.

16. I feel relief rather than satisfaction after completing a task that required a lot of mental effort.
17. It's enough for me that something gets the job done; I don't care how or why it works.
18. I usually end up deliberating about issues even when they do not affect me personally.

Note. From "The Efficient Assessment of Need for Cognition," by J. T. Cacioppo, R. E. Petty, and C. F. Kao, 1984, *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 48, pp. 306-307. Copyright 1984 by Lawrence Erlbaum. The number of response options on the scales used across studies has typically ranged from five to nine, and the labels for these response options have varied from agreement—disagreement to extremely uncharacteristic-extremely characteristic. Although these variations across studies may influence the total scores obtained, they have not had dramatic effects on the relationships between interindividual variations in need for cognition and other variables in a given study.

a Reverse scored.

[Cacioppo, J. T., Petty, R. E., & Kao, C. F. (1984). The efficient assessment of need for cognition. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 48(3), 306-307]

Using the scale below, please respond to each statement according to how you would normally describe yourself." Responses are based on a 7-point Likert scale with three descriptors: 1 (strongly disagree), 4 (neither agree nor disagree), and 7 (strongly agree).

I would describe myself as someone who actively seeks as much information as I can in a new situation.

When I am participating in an activity, I tend to get so involved that I lose track of time.

I frequently find myself looking for new opportunities to grow as a person (e.g., information, people, resources).

I am not the type of person who probes deeply into new situations or things.^a

When I am actively interested in something, it takes a great deal to interrupt me.

My friends would describe me as someone who is "extremely intense" when in the middle of doing something.

Everywhere I go, I am out looking for new things or experiences.

Items were introduced in the same order above by the following: "Using the scale below, please respond to each statement according to how you would normally describe yourself." Responses were based on a 7-point Likert scale with three descriptors: 1 (strongly disagree), 4 (neither agree nor disagree), and 7 (strongly agree). CEI = Curiosity and Exploration Inventory; I-T = item-total correlation. item 4 was reverse scored; to reduce potential participant error in missing this reversed item, the word "not" is italicized.

[Kashdan, T., Rose, P. & Fincham, F.D. (2004). Curiosity and exploration: facilitating positive subjective experiences and personal growth opportunities. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 82, 3, 291-305]

Below is a collection of statements about your everyday experience. Using the scale provided please indicate how true each statement is of your general experiences. Please answer according to what really reflects your experiences rather than what you think your experiences should be. Please treat each item separately from every other item.

- Not at all true of me (1)
- Slightly true of me (2)
- Moderately true of me (3)
- Very true of me (4)
- Extremely true of me (5)

I fear others have more rewarding experiences than me.
 I fear my friends have more rewarding experiences than me.
 I get worried when I find out my friends are having fun without me.
 I get anxious when I don't know what my friends are up to.
 It is important that I understand my friends "in jokes".
 Sometimes, I wonder if I spend too much time keeping up with what is going on.
 It bothers me when I miss an opportunity to meet up with friends.
 When I have a good time it is important for me to share the details online (e.g. updating status).
 When I miss out on a planned get-together it bothers me.
 When I go on vacation, I continue to keep tabs on what my friends are doing.

[Przybylski, A., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C.R., & Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29, 1841-1848]

Other Questions

The following questions are to gauge your average use of the following online media. Use the following scale to indicate your responses:

- 1: Never
- 2: Once a month
- 3: Several times a month
- 4: Once a week
- 5: Several times a week
- 6: Once a day
- 7: All of the time

One average, how often, if ever, do you visit or use the following:

- Email?
- Facebook?
- Twitter?
- Instagram?
- Pinterest?
- YouTube?
- Tumblr?
- News websites (e.g. nytimes.com, theatlantic.com)?
- Entertainment websites (e.g. buzzfeed.com, people.com)?
- Amazon?
- Yelp?

TripAdvisor?
 Foursquare?
 Other (website you use that is not on this list)? _____

How often if ever do you post (status updates, pictures, comments, videos) on the following:

Facebook?
 Twitter?
 Instagram?
 YouTube?
 Pinterest?
 Tumblr?
 News websites (e.g. NYTimes.com, Theatlantic.com)?
 Entertainment websites (e.g. BuzzFeed.com)?
 Other? _____

How often, if ever, do you rely on the following websites to make consumer decisions (e.g., which restaurant to eat at, what book to buy, hotel to stay in, etc.)

Amazon?
 Yelp?
 TripAdvisor?
 Foursquare?
 Other review site _____?

How often if ever do you post your own reviews on the following:

Amazon?
 Yelp?
 TripAdvisor?
 Foursquare?
 Other review site _____?

Attitudes Subscale

5-point Likert scale for all items (with scoring in parentheses):

Strongly agree (5)

Agree (4)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Disagree (2)

Strongly disagree (1)

(Positive attitudes) I feel it is important to be able to find any information whenever I want online.

(Positive attitudes) I feel it is important to be able to access the Internet any time I want.

(Positive attitudes) I think it is important to keep up with the latest trends in technology.

(Anxiety/dependence) I get anxious when I don't have my cell phone.

(Anxiety/dependence) I get anxious when I don't have the Internet available to me.

(Anxiety/dependence) I am dependent on my technology.

(Positive attitudes) Technology will provide solutions to many of our problems.

(Positive attitudes) With technology anything is possible.

(Positive attitudes) I feel that I get more accomplished

because of technology.

(Negative attitudes) New technology makes people waste too much time.

(Negative attitudes) New technology makes life more complicated.

(Negative attitudes) New technology makes people more isolated.

(Preference for task switching) I prefer to work on several projects in a day, rather than completing one project and then switching to another.

(Preference for task switching) When doing a number of assignments, I like to switch back and forth between them rather than do one at a time.

(Preference for task switching) I like to finish one task completely before focusing on anything else.

(Preference for task switching) When I have a task to complete, I like to break it up by switching to other tasks intermittently.

Scoring for item 15 is reversed with strongly agree = 1 and strongly disagree = 5.

[Rosen, L.D., Whaling, K., Carrier, L.M, Cheever, N.A., & Rokkum. (2013) The Media and Technology Usage and Attitudes Scale. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29, 2501-2511]

Final Questions:

Sona ID:

Gender:

Age:

Did you have any technological difficulties completing the questionnaire?

What kind of computer did you use to complete the questionnaire?

Do you have any questions or concerns about the nature of the study itself?

Scales to be used as filler/controls:

The following questions are to measure the frequency you engage with the following mediums.

Use the following scale to indicate your responses:

1: 5+ hours

2: Between 4-5 hours

3: Between 3-4 hours

4: Between 2-3 hours

5: Between 1-2 hours

6: Less than 1 hour

7: Never

Watch live television on the average weekday.

Watch television on a computer or tablet on the average weekday.
 Watch live television on the average weekend.
 Watch television on a computer or tablet on the average weekday.
 Read emails for work or school on the average weekday.
 Read emails from friends or family on the average weekday.
 Write emails for work or school on the average weekday.
 Write emails for friends or family on the average weekday.
 Play video games on a smartphone or tablet on the average weekend.
 Play video games on a computer on the average weekend.
 Play video games on game consoles on the average weekend.

The following questions are to measure your genre preferences for television and film. Use the following scale to indicate your responses:

- 1: Often
- 2: Sometimes
- 3: Rarely
- 4: Never

Television

Comedies and sitcoms
 Entertainment television (E!, MTV, etc.)
 Reality television
 Sports
 Dramas
 News (CNN, FOX, etc.)

Movies

Romance
 Comedy
 Thriller/Suspense
 Horror
 Romantic Comedy
 Fantasy
 Historical
 Action

The following questions are to measure the frequency you engage with the following mediums. Use the following scale to indicate your responses:

- 1: Often
- 2: Sometimes
- 3: Rarely
- 4: Never

Went to the movie theater.
 Watched a movie online.
 Read an entertainment magazine (People, etc.)
 Texted someone you know.
 Read a book for pleasure or fun.
 Read a book for class or work.

Bought a physical CD at a store.
Listened to digital music (Pandora, Spotify, etc.)
Took a photograph using a Smartphone.
Took a photograph using a digital camera.
Took a photograph using a film camera.
Used a search engine.
Called a friend using a cell phone.
Called a friend using a payphone.