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Online Credibility in the case of Online Travel Blogs

Steemit.com Case Study

By:

Andrei Alexandru POPA

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Abstract

In this paper, the author analyses different aspects of credibility, focusing on credibility in the case of online travel blogs, particularly on travel blogs and bloggers of the Steemit.com platform, showing that credibility is a multifaceted notion and a rather complex and difficult to define concept that has different meanings for different people. The concept of credibility is examined based on an extensive review of the wide body of existing credibility studies mainly centered around tourism/travel studies but not exclusively. The main objectives of this paper are: to provide a better understanding of the factors that influence online credibility in the case of travel blogs; to explore how 'credibility' is a concept that is valued differently, with multiple meanings, making it very difficult to 'reach'; to offer a critique of the research that deals with credibility as a singular term. Also, this study will explore the concept of credibility in relation to a relatively new and somewhat different travel blogging platform named Steemit.com, which is a blockchain based social media and blogging platform launched in 2016.The Steemit case study presented in this paper focuses specifically on travel blogging on the platform and how credible travel related posts are comparing to other similar online platforms, and what cues or details users and content creators alike use in order to attribute trust or determine if a source or author is credible to them. Based on the above, the main aim of this study is to answer the following research questions: *How do users of Steemit travel blogs perceive credibility, in relation to the blogs? What are the factors that influence online credibility in the case of travel blogs?*

In order to collect first hand qualitative data related to the topic of this research, the author of this paper set out to conduct semi-structured interviews with prominent Steemit bloggers that have been engaged in travel blogging on the platform and that have been involved with the platform almost since it started. After reaching out to members of the Steemit community through the use of the Steemit Chat application and through the use of the Steemit channels present on Discord.com, the author was able to secure interviews with three travel bloggers that met the aforementioned criteria. The findings from these interviews will be discussed and suggestions will be made for future research.

1. Introduction

It has been advocated that one of the most popular online activities is the search for information related to travelling and that reviews submitted by users could weigh-in more in the decision making process than those of experts (Scott and Orlikowski, 2012). As early as 2008, in a study of the US market, it was found that as much as 82% of internet users have checked blogs, online reviews and other online data for information relating to their travel decisions (eMarketer, 2008 in Fotis, Buhalis, Rossides, 2012).

With the expansion of Web 2.0 technologies, in recent years we have come to see a major growth of user-generated content (UGC) through the use of online social media tools (Parra-López et al., 2011). Based on existing studies (Fotis, Buhalis, Rossides, 2012; Parra-López et al., 2011; Scott and Orlikowski, 2012) these online social media tools can be categorised as: blogs (i.e. WordPress and Blogger); microblogs (i.e. Twitter); photo and video sharing platforms (i.e. Instagram, Flickr, YouTube and Vimeo); consumer review and rating websites (i.e. TripAdvisor and Booking); social networking websites (i.e. Facebook and Google+); collaborative projects (i.e. Wikitravel); social bookmarking (i.e. Delicious); and the list could go on. In the field of tourism, the use of Web 2.0 applications such as these has become common practice in what has been described as Travel 2.0 (Adam, Cobos, & Liu, 2007 in Parra-López et al., 2011, p. 640). Because of the widespread dissemination of UGC, facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies, and due to the significant influence this had on the behaviour and decision-making of travellers, UGC has "purportedly changed 'the rules of the game'" (Scott and Orlikowski, 2012, p. 29). It has been argued that the key aspect of UGC, that makes it such as 'game changer', is the way in which it has drastically altered the origin of information by abolishing the dependence of consumers on linear information provided by the producers, offering instead a wealth of unrefined information provided by their own peers (O'Connor, 2008).

With such an abundance of information, that is easily available through the use of the aforementioned Web 2.0 applications, travellers can be easily overwhelmed as their capacity to

process information is limited. This means that examining and comparing all the options is often not possible as people lack the time or ability to do so when confronted with an abundance of alternatives, and in turn, this can complicate the decision making process (Bellman et al., 2006). Under these circumstances, it can be argued that the issue of credibility is becoming increasingly important in tackling scepticism regarding online information sources among travellers. It has been suggested that, when faced with an information intensive situation, people tend to look for the opinions of their peers in order to mitigate perceived risks (Smith, Menon and Sivakumar, 2007 in O'Connor, 2008, p. 48). This kind of information is often referred to as word-of-mouth (WOM). Schmallegger & Carson (2008) as well as Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan (2008) suggest that WOM can be considered as one of the pivotal sources of information with regards to travel planning mainly because of the seemingly independent source of the message and its non-commercial nature. With the advent of the Internet, the ability of users to collect information about topics, services or products of interest from other users has led to what is described as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004). As far back as 2001, participants in a study of eWOM reviews, viewed reviews written by fellow travellers as less biased as well as easier to relate to than those written by professionals (Bickart & Schindler, 2001 in Scott & Orlikowski, 2012, p. 29).

Also, with the emergence of new WEB 2.0 applications that are packed full of innovative features, it would be interesting to see what changes, if any, these applications bring to the issue surrounding the credibility of information shared online, especially with relation to travel blogs. One such new WEB 2.0 application that the author wishes to explore within the context of travel blogging and credibility is Steemit.com, a recently launched blockchain based social media and blogging platform on which quite a large number of travel bloggers write on. This article will explore how credibility is perceived by users and content creators on this platform and how credibility of authors or content they post relating to travel might be affected by the site's features. For this purpose, interviews have been conducted with some of the leading members of the community of travel bloggers on Steemit.

1.2 Research Purpose and Objectives

The main objectives of this paper are: to provide a better understanding of the factors that influence online credibility in the case of travel blogs; to explore how ‘credibility’ is a concept that is valued differently, with multiple meanings, making it very difficult to 'reach'; to offer a critique of the research that deals with credibility as a singular term. Also, this study will explore the concept of credibility in relation to a relatively new and somewhat different travel blogging platform named Steemit.com, which is a blockchain based social media and blogging platform launched in 2016.

As suggested by Shankar, Urban & Sultan (2002), managers are interested in improving the design of electronic networks and websites so that these can achieve higher levels of trust amongst their users, and for this to happen, gaining a deeper understanding of the factors that influence online trust is needed so that they can: "better allocate their resources to trust development and management activities" (p. 326). Besides the potential managerial applications of this study, there are interesting academic considerations as well. Despite the fact that credibility has developed into a key issue for social media platforms, the concept of source credibility has received relatively little attention in the context of online travel, especially in the current Web 2.0 environment (Ayeh, Au and Law, 2013, p. 445). Because the study carried out by Ayeh, Au and Law (2013) is focused on one of the largest travel UGC site (TripAdvisor.com) and in a particular location (users from Singapore), as suggested by the authors, it remains important to study online credibility in different geographical contexts, alternative UGC platforms and looking at additional factors in order to shed more light on this complex issue and the use of UGC in travel planning. As Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan (2008, p. 3) identified the essential characteristic of WOM as being: "the perceived independence of the source of the message", this study would like to explore the extent to which users of Steemit travel blogs, perceive the authors as being independent of commercial influence. Also, based on future research recommendations made by Livin, Goldsmith and Pan (2008, p. 20), this study wishes to

explore: what are the cues that travel blog users on Steemit use to assign trust to online social influences when they lack face-to-face contact with the authors.

Based on the above, the main aim of this study is to answer the following research questions:

How do users of Steemit travel blogs perceive credibility, in relation to the blogs? What are the factors that influence online credibility in the case of travel blogs?

2. Methodology

In order to collect first hand qualitative data related to the topic of this research, the author of this paper set out to conduct semi-structured interviews with prominent Steemit bloggers that have been engaged in travel blogging on the platform and that have been involved with the platform almost since it started. After reaching out to members of the Steemit community through the use of the Steemit Chat application and through the use of the Steemit channels present on Discord.com, the author was able to secure interviews with three travel bloggers that met the aforementioned criteria.

Penelope, one of the three interviewees, is known on Steemit as PhotographyNomad (@meanmommy33 - https://steemit.com/@meanmommy33), besides being a travel blogger and travel photographer that operated exclusively on this platform since she joined in 2017, she is also the founder of a group of around 250 people (mostly women) known as Steemsugars (@steemsugars) that has a lot of travel bloggers in its ranks and has quite a large audience on the platform, she has a high reputation on the platform (61 - this metric will be explained further on), she is also the organiser of Copensteem (a Steemit festival held in Copenhagen). Since both the author of this paper and Penelope are based in Copenhagen, it was possible to arrange that the interview be conducted face-to-face. Teodora, known on Steemit as Teodora (@teodora - https://steemit.com/@teodora), is another prominent Steemit travel blogger that agreed to an interview, she has been around since the early days of the Steemit platform having joined in

October 2016, she also has a high reputation score on Steemit (64). Since Teodora is based in London and at the time of the interview was away travelling, the interview was conducted over the phone using Facebook Messenger Audio. The final interview respondent is Enrica, known on Steemit as Enrica|Red (@redrica- https://steemit.com/@redrica), she isn't a dedicated travel blogger but has travel blog posts on Steemit, has been active on the platform since mid-2017, and is a particularly active member of the community enjoying a very high reputation score (67, where over 70 would be considered "Guru" status). Since Enrica is based in London, the interview was conducted over the phone using Facebook Messenger Audio.

All three interviews were recorded in audio format, with the participant's permission, using the "Voice Memos" application available on an Iphone device and the recordings are included with this paper. The reason behind this was to simplify the task of analysing the data collected as well as to help ensure better data reliability as opposed to just taking notes of the participant's answers. The semi-structured interview approach was selected as it was deemed to be more useful and effective when it comes to extracting qualitative data relating to this subject, compared to say, a survey or questionnaire. The relatively complex nature of the subjects of credibility and blockchain-based social media blogging platform, were deemed to be better addressed in this way since this approach allows for a greater degree of freedom (for the researcher) as it allows the interviewer to as "probing" or unscheduled question that can be quite useful in order to elicit additional information related to the subject, as has been suggested by Berg (2007). The primary benefit of using this kind of interview structure that was taken into consideration by the author was the fact that it has been suggested that it could boost the ability of the researcher "...to ensure that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee; this provides more focus than the conversational approach, but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information from the interviewee" (McNamara (2009) cited in Turner, 2010, p. 755).

On top of the three interviews, the author has based a very limited amount of observations presented in this paper (mostly as a part of the discussion about Steemit) on his own experience with the platform, which given the author's familiarity with Steemit, have been hard

to avoid making. These have generally been identified as being observations resulting from the personal experience of the author who has been a part of the Steemit network since 2017 although being less active in recent times as the three interviewees, blogging almost exclusively about travel and travel photography under the name of Broke Traveller (@creutzy - https://steemit.com/@creutzy).

Given the relatively small number of interview participants, and despite the rather rich data collected from the three interviewees, the author of this paper is aware that the findings of this paper are somewhat limited in their depth and scope and should not be generalised without further research being conducted on the matter. One could in fact argue that this is somewhat speculative, at least to a certain degree, taking into account the aforementioned limitations and the relatively small amount of data used in this study, at least with regards to the Steemit platform and credibility in relation to travel blogs on the platform.

3. Literature review

3.1 Credibility

In order to discuss credibility, it is important to understand the meaning of this rather complex and multidimensional construct and what it can be used to refer to. According to Sundar & Nass, (2001) it is possible that this construct can be used to refer to a medium as a whole, a source within a medium, or a single message. One of the more classic reflexions on this matter, is that proposed by Hovland, Janis & Kelley (1953), who suggested that the concept of source credibility has at least two dimensions: competence and trustworthiness. In this context, competence is related to a source's perceived ability to offer valid statements on a subject, while trustworthiness refers to a source's perceived willingness to convey truthful information. Furthermore, according to Tseng and Fogg (1999, in Winter & Krämer, 2014, p. 3) credibility shouldn't be considered as an objective feature of a source or message, but as the outcome of an attribution process that the recipient has gone through. A rather recent shift in the way researchers have started approaching this subject, in the wake of the development of Web 2.0

applications and UGC, is by focusing down the issue of credibility, looking at the single sources within sites/applications such as users who make content on UGC platforms or journalistic sources as opposed to just looking at a site's credibility or the general credibility of the Web as a medium (Winter & Krämer, 2014). While this approach has its merits, it is the researcher's belief that, since many online platforms and applications in the tourism industry tend to moderate and filter out content created by their users, the aforementioned approach of disregarding the site's credibility might not be appropriate in all circumstances but would rather be more suited for the more decentralized platforms, where content creators are given the freedom to express themselves without being censored.

A definition of credibility suggested by Flanagin & Metzger (2007 – in MacArthur 2007) is "the believability of a source or message, which is made up of two primary dimensions: Trustworthiness and expertise". According to Flanagin & Metzger (2007 – in MacArthur 2007), credibility is based mainly on the receiver and not necessarily on the quality of the information or the source as such. Web 2.0 is just the means of creating, sharing and reviewing content, promoting interaction between users. Those users though, always seek out specific tools to improve their digital skills and engage in conversation, carrying out a certain interaction within a social media environment. Those tools, should not just offer information and credibility, but they should also offer users the opportunity of participating in conversations in order to obtain knowledge and create their very own, credible content.

There is also a large body of research regarding the online environment and how it can influence the information provided and therefore its credibility (Fogg et al. 2001). Fogg continues on the subject by saying that credibility is actually affected by 'external factors' as well, such as technical issues of a website. Ivory & McGraw (2005) add to this discussion by stating that even though credibility can be actually affected by technology, such an event is frequently undetectable by most users.

As Lankes (2008) points out, there are new expectations arising regarding information on the internet, therefore businesses, especially within the travel sector, need to transform in order

to follow those expectations. If they do not adapt to those new prospects, then most users will turn to where they can participate more actively in discussions, by commenting and reviewing, or they will even start creating their own content and web spaces. If that happens, we should consider the fact that users tend to create content under their own terms, re-defining the very core of credibility online, resulting in a change of authority standards as we know them. Moreover, these new patterns of credibility would result in a worldwide achievement, bringing same minded communities together, regardless of location, gender, age, race or other dividing lines.

As previously mentioned, research shows that online credibility can be affected by a number of different factors, but as Giudice (2010) suggests, website reviews influencing directly the credibility of the information provided, it is not yet fully investigated. In other words, it is not a sure fact that the user will be influenced to accept or not the information as credible. Giudice (2010), mentioning different studies (Corritore, Kracher, & Wiedenbeck, 2003; Fink-Shamit & Bar-Ilan, 2008; Metzger, 2007; Walther, Wang & Loh, 2004), arrives to the conclusion that credibility actually means 'trust in a source', initially evaluating the information as convincing, therefore 'credible', and secondly as factual and accurate. Giudice (2010) referring to the work of (Dutta-Bergman,2003; Fogg & Tseng, 1999; Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Metzger, 2007) suggests that a synonym of 'credibility' would be 'believability' of the information, or whether the user trusts and has confidence in the information.

Fogg and Tseng (1999) have distinguished four types of credibility that can be linked with a piece of information: (1) presumed credibility, (2) reputed credibility, (3) surface credibility, and (4) experienced credibility.

1. *Presumed credibility* is the credibility given to a piece of information due to the source (e.g., a close friend you trust who recommends a webpage).

2. *Reputed credibility* is credibility given to a source via third-party recommendations or through the credentials of the source (e.g., an expert recommending a webpage).

3. *Surface credibility* identifying with technical characteristics of the online source such as the navigation process or the design of a particular webpage, influencing your sense of trust

4. *Experienced credibility* depends on 'interactions with the source and the outcome of those interactions' (e.g., transactions with Trip Advisor or other travel sites).

Given the vast amount of information available online, credibility is viewed by some as an important criteria in the decision-making process that governs whether an information is used or rejected, thus, connecting the construct of preliminary credibility evaluations to the process of information selection (Kalbfleisch, 2003; Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Winter & Krämer, (2014) believe that the information relating to the source of the message as well as the credibility of the message has an important role to play not just in the selection of information, when users decide what content to consume, but also as a part of the persuasion process, and therefore proposed that the attribution of credibility should be viewed as a prerequisite for the selection of materials and source descriptions and should be factored in as one of the influencers of selective exposure.

It is widely accepted that the characteristics of the source play a vital role in the process of establishing credibility (Winter & Krämer, 2014). Research such as that of Pornpitakpan (2004) shows that information put forth by sources that are perceived as trustworthy and competent has a bigger impact in shaping reader's attitudes and actions. According to Sundar (2008) the authority heuristic (enforces the belief that respectable sources are typically correct) is often activated by relevant source information such as the name of the publication, that is associated with a particular reputation and also expectations amid its users. Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, and Hastall (2007) discovered that participants to their study had a tendency to report a better chance of them accessing an article, if that article belonged to a reputable source. However, in the context of user-generated content, evaluating credibility is possibly a more complex issue. According to Winter & Krämer (2014), laypersons, whilst often considered to be less knowledgeable or competent when compared to experts in a field, can possess an advantage when it comes to their perceived trustworthiness due to their similarity to a majority of users and do not tend to have any persuasive intents. This is also mirrored by a study focusing on online

product reviews by Willemsen, Neijens, and Bronner (2012), whose findings indicated that self-proclaimed experts were perceived as having a competency edge over the layperson reviewers, but lost out when it came to trustworthiness. In the same study by Willemsen, Neijens, and Bronner (2012), the only ones that managed to achieve a high score in both credibility dimensions, that the authors were examining, were rated experts (those that had a "top reviewer" badge) who users often perceived as being both competent and trustworthy. Since such badges are often acquired following the submission of a larger number of reviews and does not always take into account the feedback from the users (such as post likes, helpfulness indicators, etc.), and also because people that aren't experts can claim to be experts, it can be argued that the perceptions that people have of credibility when it comes to online sources of information is often based on rather trivial facts, often due to time constraints or even the availability of information. It would be rather foolish to believe that author information in Web 2.0 is at all times correct.

Fogg et al. (2003) observed that due to the limited amounts of time that most of the Web users tend to spend on any particular site, the users are likely to develop approaches for the quick assessment of credibility. Fogg et al. (2003) suggested that most users of the Web tend to process Web information in superficial ways and that the use of peripheral cues is not an exception but rather a rule when it comes to Web use, arguing that even by looking at the terms that individuals use to describe their usage of the Web as "visiting sites" or "surfing the Web" might suggest a lightweight level of engagement as opposed to deep content processing. Whilst this might be true, research should take into account the aims of the content/information search as there could be varying possible degrees of deference to a source based on those aims Joyce (2007). As noted by Taraborelli (2008), the issue is not just a matter of gaining an understanding of the degree of engagement that might be requested by the domain of the search, and that studies that focus on the epistemic deference should factor in common limitations such as time constraints and epistemic pollution (Sterelny, 2006). Since online content is appearing at an ever increasing rate and is becoming more and more accessible through an ever expanding array of devices and gadgets, the interactions that users have on the Web tend to increase in frequency but also become shorter. When talking about epistemic pollution as the second major category of

limitations after time constraints, Taraborelli (2008, p. 5) suggested that: "the larger the volume of potentially relevant but weakly authoritative information, the more urgent is the need of efficient and cognitively viable skills for source selection."

The influence of recommendations on credibility is a theme that the literature often mentions. Since the Web 2.0 is a particularly interactive space, users generally have the power to express their thoughts on whichever topic they might choose, as well as to recommend that content to others or to rate it based on its degree of perceived quality, helpfulness or other criteria. Sundar (2008) suggested that the various popularity indicators user-generated ratings present on online platforms can often lead to a bandwagon effect. Chevalier & Mayzlin (2006) also show an important association between consumer intentions and reviews or ratings.

When discussing the main limitations of traditional studies related to Web credibility, Taraborelli (2008, p. 6) noted that the role of "predictive judgements of reliability based on proximal cues about the sources of information", have been largely neglected.

In recent years, the fast development of the Internet has facilitated the formation of an electronic form of WOM (eWOM) (Pan & Chiou, 2011; Brown, Broderick, and Lee, 2007). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) define eWOM as any positive or negative statements made by users related to a product or company that is made available to others through the Internet.

Nowadays, credibility is losing its traditional sense, which means trustworthiness of usual online materials such as ads, websites and other means of promotion (Scobel & Israel, 2006) is getting lost while consumers are looking more and more into different sources of information online (Vidgen, Sims & Powell, 2013). Web 2.0 is increasingly promoting new content, created by consumers themselves (Hajli, 2013; He, Zha & Li 2013), providing better insight of the information found in social media.

On the other hand, social media groups and other online spaces use different ways to decrease possible risks. As suggested by O'Grady (2012), users mark their content online, by defining location or other details, in order to increase the credibility they provide. Furthermore,

as indicated by Rains & Karmikel (2009), the credibility of a website also depends on its structure (such as graphics and navigation mode) and on reviews and comments of other users. As demonstrated by Smith, Menon & Sivakumar (2005), another strategy used by online communities with the purpose of increasing their credibility and trustworthiness within social media and attracting new community members, is to provide users' details via online profiles, with a certain context and background information, including reviews from fellow users.

It is common though, that some users are providing incorrect information within their posts. This problem is sometimes solved through online administrators who, with their expertise, are reviewing misleading information and suggesting different sources instead. These 'expert users' are offering their knowledge to guide and support less experienced users since they provide critique, comments and notes on posts, as they are more into specific content of forums so they can give other references than the ones mentioned in a particular forum. This helps with the credibility and accuracy of sources and content, improving the reputation of a certain platform, making it more trustworthy for other users. This way, online communities are evolving as a better source of information, inviting more people to join such social platforms where they can be based on verified knowledge and experiences. In this case, there is also a possible decrease of cost (particularly in terms of time) when accessing information online.

Research so far investigates the way users evaluate the information they find online and the sources. It appears that the first impression and opinions of a webpage are mainly based on visual aspects of the source and not as much on the information provided (Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek, & Brown, 2006; Metzger, 2005).

Guidice (2010) referring to the work of others (Drapeau, 2009; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal,Lemus, & McCann, 2003; Metzger, 2005; Robins & Holmes, 2008), indicates that even though the profusion of information accessible online is actually valuable and advantageous, more and more users now are deciding on whether the information found is indeed subject to credibility and trust. Even the domain of a certain webpage (e.g. .net instead of .com, or .edu instead of .int) can apparently influence the perceived credibility of potential users, as well as the

expertise provided by the webpage or better yet the search engine results of the particular website (Alexander & Tate, 1999; Fink-Shamit & Bar-Ilan, 2008; Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

The abundance of information online makes the search process more complex so trust at this point facilitates the procedure of choice (Lee & See, 2004). When facing many, complex and relevant sources when looking for a certain piece of information, the most credible sources are more likely to be chosen by a user (Anderson, 1981). But, as Giles (2005) and Miller (2005) note here, users cannot rely only on source reviews in order to determine information credibility. As an alternative, users should use their own experiences and knowledge in order to evaluate online content or depend on other people's opinions to decide on who they think as more credible.

As Drapeau (2009) and O'Reilly (2005) have noted, (in Giudice, 2010), the arrival of Web 2.0 technologies (including blogs, forums, tags and reviews) helped the users in the decision making when it comes to the credibility of information online. Surowiecki (2005) suggests that lately anonymous, public online work is based on the "wisdom of the crowds", therefore online 'word of mouth' in some cases, but the final decision of trust of a particular group ('crowd') is up to the user. In that case though, according to Mackay (1841) (in Burns, 2008) , the more a group of people agree about a certain piece of information, the more is taken as credible and true. The sharing of the information also contributes to the perception of that information as correct, regardless of the fact of being true or not (Fogg &Tseng, 1999; Wang, Walther, Pingree, & Hawkins, 2008). Sharing is particularly easier now with the growth of social media and networking, especially considering the editing tools provided.

As suggested by Hitlin and Rainie (2004), whenever there is feedback involved, users tend to be more doubtful of information they found online and are more likely to participate in further investigation and evaluation of the credibility of sources. Therefore, the opinion of the crowd though is only important depending on if the user agrees or not with the provided information and potentially doubting the credibility of the content.

According to Giudice (2010), in order to understand how online feedback can influence the credibility of information, we first need to comprehend how information is valued online. At the

moment, there is no feedback on every piece of information a user can come across on the internet, but it is unsure how this feedback would notably shape the credibility of online information. In order to define this, Giudice (2010) suggests three hypotheses:

1. Hypothesis 1: Feedback will actually affect the credibility of online information. Positive comments and reviews are taken as a proof of credibility, whereas negative ones are defining the information as less credible.

2. Hypothesis 2: The number of users providing feedback is the key. The larger the crowd commenting, the more credibility for the web page.

3. Hypothesis 3: Feedback will influence not just credibility of information but also decisions to use that information. Positive feedback is more likely to be used as a guide of choice, compared to negative feedback or no feedback at all.

Based on Giudice's (2010) hypothesis, it is obvious that further information about who is giving the feedback is also has an important role in establishing credibility, as the users providing that feedback are also being evaluated. This supplementary piece of information can influence the feedback, making it useful or not so useful. Of course, the familiarity with the subject or webpage can reduce the use of feedback as a factor of credibility. Giudice (2010) actually suggests further research on tailored feedback regarding credibility. This sort of feedback could increase the trust of the users to a particular online community (Byerly & Brodie, 2005; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Fogg & Tseng, 1999).

According to Metzger et al. (2010), much of the research, related to the credibility of online information and sources, which has been conducted between 2000 and 2010, proceeded from dual assumptions that were untenable, even in 2010. These assumptions are that users make decisions regarding credibility on their own without taking into consideration more social ways and tools of credibility evaluation, but also that users have to assess information in a "cognitively

effortful fashion" without giving much thought to the more heuristic strategies that can be used to form assessments of credibility.

Initially theorised and coined by Lewin (1947), and applied to the study of news by White (1950), gatekeeping refers to the process that content creators go through in order to choose what will be published or reported, or, in other words, what information is released to the audience (Westerman, Spence & Heide, 2014).

Metzger et al. (2010) believe that recent socio technical developments present us with new ways for information evaluation and assessment of credibility that are based on social and group interactions. Since 2010, it can be argued that the online media landscape has evolved even more, making at least part of the traditional research on credibility obsolete. In fact, as far back as the year 2000, Callister (2000) argued that existing conventions of assessing credibility tend to fall apart in cyberspace. According to Callister (2000, p. 412) the ideas that credibility could be granted to some representative that is perceived to deliver reliable information such as a government (in some cases) or that credibility could be granted though credentials are likely to work only in an information scarce environment where the barriers for public access are high, since those conditions lead to the creation of a "meritocratic filtering process" whereby only the individuals with something of value or merit to say are being brought forth and published. Westerman, Spence & Heide (2014) have also identified that with the growth of new media, users are less reliable on what gets through traditional gatekeepers, being able to bypass them completely and access sources directly, sources that are in many cases users themselves, who can act as their own gatekeepers. Since the gates are no longer solely in the hands of information providers but also in those of information consumers, it has been argued by Bruns (2008) that there's been a shift from what was known as "gatekeeping" to what Bruns calls "gatewatching", where gatewatchers are not in control of the information that passes through the "gate" but keep a watchful eye on them, choosing what to pass on to others that have the ultimate decision to make about whether a topic is relevant or credible, thus it can be suggested that gatewatchers are

the ones that endorse or diffuse by sharing information sources and making them known to others (Westerman, Spence & Heide, 2014).

Metzger et al. (2010) builds on Callister's (2000) aforementioned ideas, stating that under certain circumstances (information scarce environment), it is conceivable that gatekeepers can produce or filter much of the available information and that those gatekeepers can have an incentive to maintain credibility standards, in opposition to the world of the Internet, which is an information abundant environment that renders "traditional models of gatekeeping oversight untenable" (p. 414) and that in such an environment, individuals have to defer to external sources of information on quite a big scale which would result in a 'radical externalization of the processes involved in trust assessment'' (Taraborelli, 2007, p. 1).

There is growing evidence that within an environment as information abundant as the Web, the most common means of coping with issues such as information overload, credibility and uncertainty, is heuristic, rather than systematic, cognitive processing (Sundar, 2008; Taraborelli, 2008; Metzger et al., 2010; Wirth, Bocking, Karnowski, & von Pape, 2007; Pirolli, 2005). Metzger et al. (2010) suggests that it is probable that those who seek information online deal with information overload and the costs of information search by looking for strategies that could reduce their cognitive effort and the amount of time it takes them to conduct the search, by making use of cognitive heuristics. According to Metzger et al. (2010, p. 417) "Cognitive heuristics thus constitute information-processing strategies consisting of useful mental shortcuts, rules-of thumb, or guidelines that reduce cognitive load during information processing and decision making". Gigerenzer and Todd (1999, p. 14), state that: ''heuristics employ a minimum of time, knowledge, and computation to make adaptive choices'' and ''can be used to solve problems of sequential search through objects or options''. One major finding of Metzger et al. (2010) was that individuals do actually take the time to cross-validate and pursue social confirmation as a way of evaluating credibility in an efficient, less time consuming manner which conserves cognitive resources. In this context, the notion of social confirmation, commonly referred to as "social proof", appears to underline the idea that credibility can be established based on the beliefs and actions of others. Thus, if a sufficient number of users

endorse, agree with and use a particular online source of information, then other users tend to assume that it is credible. This effect can be regarded sometimes as "jumping on the bandwagon", or what Sundar (2008) calls "the bandwagon effect", it can also be called "trusting in the wisdom of the crowds". As noted by Metzger et al. (2010), this heuristic is often useful and efficient in assisting users to find credible information, it is still not ideal since it depends on issues related to crowd behaviour and it is quite possible that it could mistakenly equate popularity with credibility.

The study conducted by Metzger et al. (2010), despite being limited in location to just the United States, is particularly interesting since it is based on a reasonably large number of in-depth focus group sessions as opposed to the majority of credibility studies that rely on surveys and quasi-experimental data, and as such, it provides a deeper and more diverse picture of the attitudes and behaviours of users and their relation to credibility of online information sources. In their study, Metzger et al. (2010) identified that many of the participants of their focus group identified advertising as well as perceived commercial intent as a major negative heuristic cue when deciding upon the credibility of a source of information. This is supported also by previous research, Flanagin & Metzger (2000) suggested that commercial information is regarded as being less credible as a whole. Fogg et al. (2003) also identified that users tend to become immediately negative about an online source's credibility when presented with unexpected commercial content. A possible implication of this could be that when users sense that an information provider has a hidden motive, or suspect some kind of commercially motivated manipulation, then an immediate defence mechanism would be triggered and credibility would be impacted negatively.

Some of the older studies such as that by Fogg et al. (2001) examined the issue of recency of updates and have argued that the speed with which the content of a website is updated has a big impact on credibility (more frequent updates is equated with higher levels of credibility. Since social media appears to be close to a perfect tool for catering to the needs of those individuals who are after information in real time, or as close to real time as possible, the issue of recency has potentially lost some of its weight. A good example of this would the case of Twitter, whose

distinguishing feature is the immediacy of updating (Levinson, 2009), which is the probable cause behind this channel's growth, since up to date information is sought-after, particularly in crisis situations.

Grabner-Kräuter (2009) is suggesting the main difference between Web 2.0 and the traditional internet is that there is better cooperation between users and therefore most of the content is user-generated and that the most remarkable application of it the last few years has been the creation of online communities and social networks, with user-to-user interaction, which is a completely different kind of communication.

Some scholars, such as Dholakia (2004) and Ridings (2002) define 'social media' (or 'networks') and online communities as two different entities, even though they are often considered the same thing. Online communities are mostly groups of different sizes, which include constant communication between members, organized for a certain duration in order to achieve personal or shared goals. So the researcher would point out here, that virtual communities are actually part of social networks.

Another perception of credibility, as expressed by Fogg & Tseng (1999), is that it does not refer to a specific object, person or information, so when talking about the credibility of a product there is a need of defining clearly the idea of credibility to start with. Some scholars, such as Buller & Burgoon (1996), Gatignon & Robertson (1991), Petty (1981), Self (1996) and Stiff (1994), all agree that the different views of credibility result from assessing various proportions at the same time. Even though the literature differs on how many different dimensions offer an added value to credibility assessment, most of the scholars agree to its two distinct elements: Expertise and Trustworthiness. That means, that in order to evaluate credibility we need to take into account both of those factors.

According to Fogg (1999), expertise has to do with knowledge, experience and competencies whereas trustworthiness has to do with truthfulness. In this case, highly credible sources usually include those two elements, both expertise and trustworthiness.

The latest technological developments, within the area of the Web, including new high technology phones, tablets and computers, have transformed and developed immensely the travel industry to a massively technology supported network. The service offered within the tourism industry is not people based anymore, but in most cases digitally based. Travellers, either as an individual or as groups, have much more options online thus better control over organizing and tailoring their travels. They do not only look for information online to expand their existing knowledge within travel but they also connect and interact with other travellers and platform users to exchange experiences and knowledge regarding specific trips or travel in general. Feedback, reviews and recommendations help travellers find more easily what they are looking for online (Neidhardt et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2009), which gets us to the idea, as Hepburn (2007) suggests that new technologies activated people to be more engaged within travel and tourism by developing their own ideas and opinions.

As found by recent researchers (Bjorkelund et al., 2012; Gretzel et al., 2007; Rabanser& Ricci, 2005), the most popular travel online platforms at the moment are TripAdvisor, Expedia, VirtualTourist, and LonelyPlanet. And the main reason for that could be, as demonstrated from quite a few different scholars such as Akehurst (2009), Gretzel (2007), Rabanser& Ricci, (2005) and Xiang (2009), that those platforms have been found are the most credible and trustworthy comparing to other similar websites and agencies.

As well as travel specific travel platforms as mentioned above, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others, are of great significance when it comes to electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Confente, 2015; Garcia-Pablos et al., 2016; Leung et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2017). The reason is that social media, together with online travel platforms and travel blogs currently offer a cheap way of collecting original traveller data. Akehurst (2009) suggests that even though the traditional word-of-mouth, such as personal advice, is still the leading and most significant resource when organizing a trip, the general credibility of online travel platforms such as blogs or online travel organizers is considerably high. Probably this happens because travel platforms are seen as a supplement to personal advice e.g. from friends, family and colleagues. The fact is, that the number of online information is rising at a

tremendously fast rate which makes it difficult and long procedure for travellers and travel industry experts to get the actually relative and useful data about travel experiences.

Akehurst (2009) suggests that user generated contents (UGCs) are taking a very important position within the tourism industry. According to Manap & Adzharudin (2013, p.54) the positive effects of UGCs "have recognized repercussions on quantifiable phenomena such as ecommerce, but also on intangible matters such as those related to the image or the informational side of specific products or services". Blackshaw & Nazzaro (2006) defines UGC content as all the material created by consumers, specifically travellers, such as reviews, photos and online profiles, but also as a combination of knowledge, memories and personal experiences. As Manap & Adzharudin (2013) argue, UGC can also be explained as the exchange of online information between users, including pictures, texts or other. They also point out that social media can be considered as a new source regarding travel and can actually be an opponent to the traditional tourism entities such as travel agencies. Specifically within tourism, Bronner & De Hoog (2011) mention that UGC is the base of social media and progressively more pertinent to the travel industry. Therefore, UGC can be considered to play a crucial role in the decision making of modern travellers.

3.2 Tourism and the Blogosphere: Travel Blogs

Within the work of Schmallegger & Carson 'Blogs in tourism' (2008), the researcher found out valuable information regarding travel blogs and their impact in today's tourism industry. This particular study is significantly relevant to the thesis topic that is why it was chosen to be analysed in this chapter.

Travel forums, where travellers can exchange views, experiences and knowledge is not something new. They have been online for nearly twenty years now and they have a certain influence on decision making when planning a new trip. Since online systems, such as Web 2.0, appeared, including new technologies, the significance of the Web within tourism was definitely increased. As Pan, MacLaurin, and Crotts, (2007) confirm, travel blogs grew rapidly since then,

creating a new trend within travel and tourism, with about 70 million blogs all the way back in April 2007 (Sifry D., 2007) however the exact number today is unclear but we can assume that they have increased since at the time, about 120,000 new blogs were being created each day. Further research conducted back in 2007 (Sarks, G., 2007) shows that UGC influenced the industry by 10 billion USD a year in online travel bookings, proving that over 20 percent of travellers depend on UGC when organizing trips, a number that has most likely significantly increased since then. One of the main reasons that happened is the high credibility offered by personal opinions comparing to tradition travel related information resources. Different researchers around that time, such as Rabanser & Ricci (2005), Senecal & Nantal (2004) and Dellaert (2000) argued that there was a need of more personal experience of travellers associated to a travel product, such as the planning of a trip, an advantage though that can be scarcely assessed before the consummation of the product – in this case, before the realization of the trip. Word of Mouth, and later eWOM, has always been considered 'personal experience' and therefore one of the most significant, and likely trustworthy, source of information when planning a new trip, mostly because of the autonomy of the message itself (Crotts, 1999). Electronic word of mouth became rapidly a new, popular trend, as the era of digitalization came along.

Even back in 2007, it seems like in the UK consumers were trusting more amateur travellers' experiences than travel agents or professional travel guides (eMarketer, 2007) same as the Austrian National Tourism Organization (Österreich Werbung, 2007) disclosed that German tourists trust more fellow travellers' reviews than travel agencies, as being more 'credible'.

Gretzel (2007) actually reported that Trip Advisor users, while planning a trip, were more interested in other people's reviews and travel blogs, rather than official tourism materials. The reason for that is that blogs are most of the times interactive, by commenting, responding and sharing personal experiences, and regularly updated. The main difference of blogs back in the day, is that now they usually include photos, videos and music besides the usual text, which makes them more believable to potential consumers. In a flourishing blog era, besides the personal travel blogs, describing their own travel stories, which are shared within travel online

communities, there are also review sites (e.g. tripadvisor.com), travel agencies (e.g. Tui) or online travel guides (e.g. lonelyplanet.com) offering the free option of sharing personal travel stories online.

In the study of Schmallegger & Carson (2008), it is mentioned significant information about travel blogs, that most individual travellers might not be aware of. Travel blogs do not only target C2C (consumer-to-consumer) communications, but also B2B (business to business), B2C (business to consumer) or even G2C (government to consumer) communications, making an impact on destination management (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008, p.101).

Besides those different categories though, most of the travel blogs are keeping their personal character by belonging to the C2C category. Even though, such travel blogs (also called 'travel diaries' of some sort - Schmallegger & Carson (2008), p.102) are first and foremost published to be shared with relatives and friends, or as 'a need for self-expression', they evolved to be an interactive forum for travellers comparing their trip experiences. The authors argue though, that travel blogs expanded much more than a personal, social interaction with family and friends or like-minded people, presenting a threat to tourism businesses across the globe, as negative feedback could potentially damage the professional status of some of those businesses and it is quite unclear how that could be avoided.

Schmallegger & Carson (2008), based on Waldhör (2007) study: 'eBlogAnalysis – Analyzing Touristic Web Blogs and Forums Using Statistical and Computer Linguistic Methods for Quality Control' notes that most personal travel blogs ('travel diaries') are usually more general when it comes to details about a certain destination, when on the other hand, blogs within travel forums and communities offer more specific suggestions (e.g. accommodation, activities, attractions and so on). Another distinct category of travel blogs is the 'company blogs' (tourism professional blogs such as travel agencies, airlines, restaurants, hotels etc). The company blogs function quite differently in the way they are created and, most importantly, the reason they are created. G2C blogs (Government To Consumer) usually follow the same scheme as company blogs, but instead of having insiders writing their own comments, most of the times they hire

professional travel bloggers (Schmallegger, D., & Carson, D. 2008, p.102). Since 2007, locals started to be part of travel blogs, for a more exclusive and impulsive view of a certain destination, therefore more trustworthy. Nowadays, such blogs (e.g. Spotted by Locals) are very popular, as travellers require more of an original travel experience rather than the typical, 'traditional' way of travelling.

Schmallegger, D., & Carson, D. (2008) mention many researchers (Pan, B, MacLaurin, T. and Crotts, J., 2007; Waldhör, K., 2007; Romell, R., 2005; Choi, S. J., Lehto, X.Y. and Morrison, A.M.,2007; Douglas, A. and Mills, J., 2006) have suggested that travel blogs are a new way of helping 'define the image of a destination or a company', in a non-traditional manner. But again, as previously mentioned, the biggest issue here is how to use this new trend in their benefit, without risking the credibility of the platform. Nevertheless, the compromise of credibility in this case would be highly unlikely, since negative comments would probably not be able to harm the company, rather than improving the credibility of UGC websites (EyeforTravel, 2007). Either way, it is true that travel blogs with UGC are increasingly considered reliable, trustworthy and credible, being a new, more original source of information, reflecting personal traveller opinions.

Traditional word of mouth (WOM) usually happens within social environments when people know each other, such as family and friends, whereas, eWOM (electronic word of mouth) usually occurs in public communications between unfamiliar people. If people are not acquainted, it is much harder to share information unless that information is perceived as credible. Therefore, credibility plays an important role when it comes to eWOM and it is affected by expertise and trustworthiness, as it is an indispensable factor of eWOM (Chang and Wu, 2014; Cheung et al., 2009). WOM communications at the moment take over a vast part of the Web, so the users face difficulties when looking for reliability online (Smith et al., 2007).

In the recent research of Ismagilova, E., Slade, E., Rana, N. P., & Dwivedi, Y. K. (2019), it is stated that there are studies that tended to analyze the effect of credibility on the consumers, but apparently fewer studies investigated on the different characteristics of credibility and how

those can affect the consumers. The users of WOM communications are more likely to consider the information obtained in their decision-making process if they consider them credible (Aladwani and Dwivedi, 2018).

It had been previously mentioned that trustworthiness and expertise between like-minded people result to a positive assessment of online review channels. Nevertheless, there are still some sources suggesting that credibility depends on different characteristics and variables examined. There is an available literature on eWOM credibility, but these studies do not underline certain, distinct characteristics of source credibility and their influence on readers.

Mosquera &Moreda (2012) in their study on credibility, examine the notion of quality within social media, considering that the amount of available online information the last few years has enormously increased. In order to be able to discard low quality (or low interest) content, we have to assess content quality and credibility by identifying three main elements:

1. Content visibility is directly related to the possibility of a website getting noticed online (Fogg, 2003)

2. Trustworthiness and expertise are the main factors of credibility (Hovland, Irving, and Harold 1953).

3. User's interpretation of any given online content is a supplementary factor to take into account (Fogg, 2003).

In Web 2.0 applications, it is common to find positive or negative feedback or reviews (sometimes in the form of 'votes', e.g. 'likes' on Facebook), especially on UGCs. Mosquera &Moreda (2012) here suggest that even text characteristics (such as punctuation, formatting, grammar mistakes and typos) affect the quality and the credibility of information online.

4. Steemit.com - A new, niche platform for Travel blogs

The Steemit platform is essentially a blogging and social networking platform that has been superimposed on the Steem blockchain database (Chohan, 2018). It all started with the Steem concept being presented in a whitepaper in March, 2016, and the Steemit platform being officially launched in July, 2016. Today, the platform is home to 1,324,692 registered users (Steem Block Explorer, 2019), which is a very tiny number compared with Reddit's almost 330 million. One way that Steemit can be described is as a social blogging platform that is similar to websites such as Medium and Reddit, where users can publish content and vote on content posted by others, but also themselves. Unlike Reddit, and most other social blogging platforms out there, Steemit rewards its users with money, in the form of Steem and SBD (Steem Backed Dollars), which are cryptocurrencies, similar to Bitcoin or Ethereum. Users of Steemit can transfer Steem or SBD to a cryptocurrency exchange such as Bittrex.com or Binance.com and convert it to Bitcoin, which they can then choose to sell for a fiat currency such as Euros or US Dollars, depending on their needs. Alternatively, users of Steemit may choose to use Steem or SBD within the Steemit platform, buying goods and services or reinvesting in the platform by locking their digital tokens up for a period of time through a process called "powering up" so that their votes carry more weight (monetary returns), but also use them with a few vendors that accept these cryptocurrencies as a form of payment for goods and services. Users of the platform receive rewards in Steem and SBD for their posts and also for the comments they post on their or other users' content but also from upvoting (liking) content that will later become popular, early on after the content has been published, thus receiving what is referred to as "curation rewards". Basically users get rewarded for their contributions, whether it is content they posted, comments or for their curation efforts in identifying quality posts early on and helping those posts get more attention. Although the economics of the platform are quite interesting, they are also rather complex and will not be presented in detail in this paper.

According to its creators, Steem is : "a blockchain database that supports community building and social interaction with cryptocurrency rewards [...] Steem is an experiment designed to address challenges in the cryptocurrency and social media industries by combining the best

aspects of both. Steem presents earning opportunities to content creators and internet readers in ways that have not existed within the social media industry" (Steem Whitepaper, 2018, p. 2, 26). On the other hand, Steemit is a decentralized application (DApp) built on top of the Steem blockchain, that uses the Steem and SBD cryptocurrencies to reward content creators. A decentralized application or DApp, can be defined as a computer application that runs on a distributed computing system and is completely open-source, operates autonomously, has internal cryptocurrency support, can achieve decentralized consensus among its nodes and has no central point of failure (Cai et al., 2018).

Based partly on the aforementioned literature, from the literature review, the author of this paper believes that, at least to a certain extent, the monetization model of a platform does play an important role in how credible the information presented on that platform is to its users. As advertising has managed to "invade" almost every part of our "digital world", there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that users seeking, for instance, travel information online, are becoming increasingly more aware and concerned about the commercial motivations of the sources that they are getting information from. Whilst under most established content monetization models, advertising is being leveraged by content creators in order to seek some financial returns for their time, on Steemit, content creators can monetize their content by appealing directly to the Steem community and having their content recognised by the community through "upvotes" or "likes" that carry a financial reward. One could argue that when it comes to the credibility of online travel blogs/bloggers, a voluntary author/content creator that seeks no financial rewards for his/hers work, might be perceived as more credible or trustworthy. It can also be argued that content creators that monetize their content through the use of advertising, either overtly or covertly, risk diminishing the value of their work in the eyes of the consumers, in terms of how credible the information they present is. This can also be true for content creators that receive financial benefits from third parties in exchange for creating content. Take for instance, a travel blogger, writing about a hotel he/she is staying in while receiving financial benefits from that hotel (or even just a free stay), or one that goes on a tour of a winemaking region with all their expenses paid for by the local tourism authority, and the list can go on and on. And here lies the problem, namely, just how credible is the information being

put forward by such sources. It is in this area that the author of this paper believes that more research should be conducted in order to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence the credibility of online travel blogs. One hypothesis could be that if the travel bloggers would be, at least to a certain extent, free from financial pressure coming from commercial or governmental entities from the travel industries, their content could carry more weight and might be perceived as being more credible to the consumers of such media but also could allow content creators to spend more time on making more qualitative content.

There are other examples from the online travel blogging industry of travel blogs that use different approaches to achieve a, arguably, similar result, for instance SpottedByLocals.com which is a series of city travel blogs that is run by a few individuals that have created a world-wide network of voluntary bloggers, called "spotters", that write about places and attractions in their home cities without receiving any financial rewards. The founders and their marketing and social media manager support the platform and themselves through ad revenue to their website and through the sale of city guides in the form of mobile phone applications for IPhone and Android devices, as well as car navigation plugins. However, it can be argued that the effort that the "spotters"/bloggers put in is less than someone deriving direct financial rewards from their blogging activities. There is also the issue of "gatekeeping". In the case of SpottedByLocals.com, the two founders and their marketing and social media manager get to decide what gets published and what not, as well as which articles make it to their front page. Steemit on the other hand, represents a very different approach. Although it is not a dedicated travel blogging platform as such, the travel section of the platform became one of the top sections of the platform in terms of number of posts and engagement, with content creators and curators receiving substantial rewards for their efforts.

Because Steemit is a decentralized, permissionless platform, there is hardly any form of censorship being practiced there, apart from the community having the possibility of "downvoting" as opposed to "upvoting" in order to hide and strip posts of their rewards if they are deemed unworthy (for instance plagiarized posts). Users are free to post whatever they please and the main determining factor behind an article making it to the "front page" or the "trending

page" being the content's popularity measured by number of comments and "upvotes". This interesting and innovative environment has given rise to initiatives such as TravelFeed (https://steemit.com/@travelfeed) that curates travel content on Steemit and rewards and promotes travel content creators that otherwise might have gone unnoticed, helping them gain exposure by sharing their posts to their followers.

Besides the number of followers a content creator on Steemit has, and how many "upvotes" their blog posts get, there is another interesting feature of Steemit that might have some impact on user's perception of credibility with regards to the posts, and that feature is called "user reputation". Basically, each account on Steemit has a Steemit Reputation Score displayed next to their account name. This is generally intended as an indicator of a user's standing within the Steemit community and it is affected by various factors such as the number of upvotes/downvotes received by a user's posts and comments (Steemit, 2017). A new account starting out on Steemit would start with a reputation score of 25 points out of 100 and as they move up in reputation, it becomes exponentially harder for them to gain points (Steemit, 2017). Currently the top reputation on Steemit is 85 and it is held by the @haejin account, an account with more than 32000 followers, that blogs about market data and technical trading analysis. Accounts are often generalised/categorised based on the reputation rating they have. A prominent such categorisation classifies accounts with 25 reputation as "Baby" accounts, the ones that just started out and have not received upvotes on their posts; "Toddler" accounts, are accounts with between 30 and 39 reputation, that have done some blogging and are becoming somewhat familiarised with the platform; "Kid on the block(chain)" accounts with reputation scores between 40 and 49 are those that understand Steemit and have done reasonably well gathering support from the community; "Blogger" accounts are considered those with reputation scores of between 50 and 59, they are perceived as good at earning Steem and contributors of quality content to the ecosystem; "Professional" are accounts with between 60 and 69 are deemed to have a well established following and are seen as producing consistently valuable content; and lastly, "Guru" accounts, with a reputation of 70 or higher, that are viewed as experts

of the Steem blockchain, likely to be early adopters that are well acquainted with the inner workings of the Steemit platform (Steemit, 2017).

One of the main issues with the Steemit platform that has arisen is that of voting abuse. This is something that has been pointed out during the interviews with bloggers that use the platform but it's also something that the author of this paper has noticed during his use of the network. Essentially, the issue here is that some individuals that have a lot Steem power (Steem tokens locked up into the platform) and thus, are heavily invested into Steemit, can sometimes engage into what is referred to as voting abuse. Voting abuse might be considered to be when someone is voting on their own posts in order to collect the rewards arising from their voting power, other instances can include the use of voting bots, which are programs that vote on content based on a set of pre-established parameters, which have received voting power delegated from one or multiple accounts in the form of Steem tokens. These bots can be controlled by one or multiple individuals, that can use these bots to reward only themselves or their friends by setting up the bots to vote for their content. It can be argued that this issue can lead to a type of "gatekeeping", as the abuse of voting power by powerful actors on the network can have the potential to restrict/reduce the visibility of other users' posts that could, because of this phenomenon, not make it to the site's "trending" or "hot" pages, where they could get more exposure and receive more support in terms of rewards and engagement with the community. Interestingly, this issue is addressed directly by the creators of the platform in the public whitepaper of Steem (a kind of blueprint for how the network is designed to work). Referring to voting abuse, the creators of Steemit are quite optimistic stating, among other things, that:

"Fortunately, any work that is getting a large concentration of votes is also gaining the most scrutiny (publicity). Through the addition of negative voting it is possible for many smaller stakeholders to nullify the voting power of collusive groups or large, defecting stakeholders. Furthermore, large stakeholders have more to lose if the currency falls in value due to abuse than they might gain by voting for themselves. In fact, honest large stakeholders are likely to be more

effective by policing abuse and using negative voting than they would be by voting for smaller contributions." (Steem Whitepaper, 2018, p. 12).

This optimistic view isn't shared by everyone though, as all of the interview participants, as well as the author of this paper (through personal experience blogging on the platform) and the Steemit travel blogger review of the platform, mentioned that voting abuse is unfortunately still an ongoing issue. Although it is far from clear what impact such an issue can have on the credibility of travel blog posts or on the credibility of some of the bloggers of the platform, it can be argued that such behaviour can have a significant impact on the way users attribute trust on the network as this behaviour influences reputation scores, number of upvotes and the positioning of content within the website structure. Two of the interview respondents (Teodora and Enrica) have pointed out that the issue has been recently (about a month ago) addressed to at least to some extent by the developer team in the lastest hard-fork of the blockchain (this happens when a big update is made to a network's protocol causing it to split into two incompatible versions, requiring an update to the latest version from all the nodes or user), but they weren't quite sure in which way this has been done or how effective the measures that have been taken have been. This could be something worth looking into more detail in the future as it seems to be a criticism that is often mentioned.

One important dynamic identified by all the interview participants but also frequently mentioned by the overall credibility literature (Winter & Krämer, 2014), is that the characteristics of the source have a vital role to play in the process of establishing credibility. This ties in to research such as that conducted by Pornpitakpan (2004), who argued that information put forth by sources that are perceived by the user/content consumer as trustworthy and competent usually has a bigger impact in shaping reader's attitudes and actions. Since Steemit is a social network as well as a collection of blogs, users tend to interact with each other more than in the case of some of the more traditional web publications or blogs. They do this directly through the comment section below a post, the Steemit Chat, or through the use of Steemit groups or private messaging within the Discord.com platform, a platform that is quite popular for post promotion, socialising and coordinating different projects or initiatives amongst

Steemit members. There are also big yearly events such as SteemFest, mentioned by all three interviewees, which is a festival that brings Steemians from all corners of the globe together and helps them build relations with other bloggers from the platform. These interactions help build rapport and trust between users, help them gain a better understanding of the motivations and characteristics of an author, this being an important element in deciding if a source is to be regarded as being credible. All of the three interviewees stated that it is important for them to know or at least have heard of a blogger, when making decisions on whether they find that source to be credible.

Steemit is still essentially an experiment, and while it gets a lot of things right, there are many areas that can be improved for a better, more transparent service whose users can have more trust in. The platform seems to be gaining momentum/traction and to be still in development so it is to be expected that certain features and protocols will continue to change over time in order to create a better and more sustainable environment, where users can attribute trust with more ease, perhaps without having to think so much about issues such as voting abuse, users buying votes or the reputation system being manipulated. where an individual with a lot of Steem Power (Steem tokens invested and locked up in the platform) can use the weight of their "upvotes" to propel themselves to the top of the "Trending" page not taking into account the quality of their posts leading to issues such as the "Trending" page being populated by posts coming from the same content creators week after week. Also, one of the things that is widely acknowledged by all of the interview respondents but also evident through the personal experience of the researcher with Steemit, is that of individuals essentially selling their voting power to enterprising users that create voting bots, automated accounts that have considerable voting power, from which some rather unscrupulous content creators buy votes from in order to receive upvotes for their content, thus being able, al least to some extent to push what can be in some instances, subpar content to the highly sought after "Trending" page. This, at least in 2017 when the author of this paper joined Steemit, seemed to be quite the hot topic within the community and has lead to a significant amount of friction between opposing sides of the community (those that are in favor of these practices and those that oppose and punish this kind of behaviour). In fact the author can remember that there was one prominent account that owned

multiple voting bots that has received considerable backlash from the community, in the form of "downvotes" and negative posts, which lead to that account being voted down by the community until it got a negative reputation and also ensured that all the posts being made by that account were stripped of their rewards (by "downvoting" a post, someone can use their voting power to offset a post's rewards to the point of completely negating those rewards to the post's author).

While these issues can be attributed to flaws in the platform's design, it is also true that not only are the developers aware of this situation, but also that the community itself is banding together in order to tackle this behaviour. One of the ways that the community seems to address this issue is by grouping together to create accounts that curate good quality content, delegate some or all of their Steem Power (or voting power) to these accounts, then use them to find, support and promote good content creators by upvoting their posts, writing posts about them or sharing their posts with the curation account's audience to increase the exposure of those accounts, in a way addressing some of the power related issues that Steemit might have at the moment at least to some extent. There are many examples of such communities on Steemit, such as the aforementioned TravelFeed account that does just that for travel posts. As such, it could be said that the future of the platform is not all grim and from the interviews conducted it would seem that all of the three respondents have a rather optimistic view about the direction that the platform is heading to despite the mistakes that the developer team has made in the past.

Indeed, it would be very hard to say if, or to what extent, this platform's distinct combination of features contribute to an environment in which it is easier for users/content consumers to assign trust to content creators such as travel bloggers, in comparison with other blogging platforms such as Reddit or Medium.

5. Interview Analysis

5.1 Penelope

Penelope joined Steemit and started making travel posts exclusively on this platform and also created a large community of mainly women (min. 2.05) on the platform called SteemSugars, most of which being either travel bloggers or travel photographers (min. 2.17). Asked whether or not Steemit would be a good place to search for travel information online, she stated that she has a lot of trust in the platform and that she believed that it would be a good place to search for any information not just travel related (min. 2.56) and that this is in part due to the high levels of engagement she noticed with regard to travel posts specifically (min 3.05). She elaborated on this specifying that she believes that travel posts on the platform have a tendency of being "very honest,very personal and most of the times it is local experiences" (min. 3.25). She doesn't believe that Steemit is a very commercial platform, in a mainstream kind of way and that a lot of the information being put forward by content creators is "insider information" (min. 4.14). While she doesn't engage as much with her audience as other bloggers, she does believe that for other bloggers, from her experience, it is the rewards that they get which make them engage that much with their audience and with other users (min. 4.46). The reputation system is identified as playing another important role in incentivising content creators to engage more in order to build an audience. Penelope thinks that no one on Steemit has a reason not to try to be credible, and that she believes that people engage because they believe in the platform and in the interactions they have on there, and when it comes to travel she thinks that that would be the most credible and clear part of the platform as opposed to politics, cryptocurrencies and others (min. 6.29). Asked what would be the most important elements/clues that would help her establish if travel information on Steemit is credible, Penelope stated that for her, knowing the author would be the primary factor, followed by the reputation of the author that would make the most difference (min. 7.45) stating that "Oh, I see he has a good reputation so this means that what he's writing about this specific destination is credible, so I take it as a given that it's trustworthy, for sure." Penelope also believes that it isn't just her that gets so heavily influenced by an author's reputation when it comes to quickly evaluating how credible a

post might be, but that other users tend to rely heavily on this metric. Recommended posts coming from people she knows within the platform also have been identified as being considered as highly credible (min. 8.40), she also mentioned that she would still look at the reputation score of a user in this case too. When asked if she's aware of some of the more questionable practices that some users turn to in order to boost their reputation score or gain more upvotes, things such as vote buying, vote bots and voting abuse, Penelope thinks that although these practices do happen on Steemit, they aren't generalised, yet, especially when it comes to travel blogs, but also compared to other platforms this happens least on Steemit (min. 10.18). Asked if the community is aware of this issue, she stated that they all know about it and that it is quite a well documented problem (min. 11.19), and that the community does "police" at least to a certain extent this kind of abuse, the same way they address plagiarism through "downvoting" their posts (removing their rewards and lowering their reputation score). She does mention that for the most part she tries not to get involved with "downvoting" that much since she is somewhat fearful that it could affect her reputation (if they revenge "downvote" her back), thus adopting a neutral position as to avoid a "downvoting war" (min. 14.00). She does mention that the yearly SteemFest is a good opportunity for travel bloggers since they get to build rapport with people and gain exposure, thus increasing their credibility within the platform, stating that: "Oh yeah, I know that guy, he's not just a random travel blogger" (min. 16.40). Asked if she thinks that travel articles that make it to the "Trending" or "Hot" pages of the travel section are more credible than new ones, she said that although she might occasionally look through those, she wouldn't associate that with them being the "best" and that she prefers to search by hashtag for articles and information rather than relying on what others deem as worthy (min. 17:56). Penelope isn't of the opinion that travel bloggers on Steemit receive that much attention from businesses, especially when it comes to incentivising reviews/articles through monetary or other benefits, mainly due to their smaller reach in terms of audience and the niche aspect of the platform. Also, she thinks that even if the author of a travel post is being transparent about what he/she is receiving (money, freebies, etc.) that wouldn't impact all that much her assessment of just how credible that post is, basing the decision on the aforementioned parameters such as reputation, and level of engagement. (min. 22.37).

5.2 Teodora

Teodora is an active contributor to the platform and she does engage in travel blogging on Steemit. She stated that she is more on an "intuitive traveler" and doesn't do research all that much when travelling, mostly because she prefers to see things through her own eyes. Asked about what would make an article seem more credible for her, she answered that it would be the characteristics of the source - how much alike they seem, with regards to their travel preferences and how much she could identify with the author and that would give her more confidence in trusting and following a particular blog (min. 2.27). Teodora is certainly interested in finding out information about the author of a post before going through the content they shared. She does mention that although she doesn't usually read other travel blogs, she knows some people on Steemit who's blogs she actually reads, and the reason for that is that she has met them in person at the SteemFest and she got to speak to them and get to know them better, thus realising that they share a common mindset when it comes to traveling (min 3.33). She does express interest for "what is not obvious or what is not touristy" (min. 3.56). Asked if she thinks that travel articles that make it to the "Trending" and "Hot" pages of Steemit are in any way more credible from her perspective than new ones, Teodora said that isn't the case but mostly because the articles she finds in those sections tend to not be about her type of traveling, are usually written by authors with a large following and portray the kind of mainstream traveling that she is not that interested in (min. 4.55). She confirms that she is aware of instances of voting abuse or vote bots being used to promote posts on those pages, but that at the same time: "sometimes miracles happen" (min. 5.23) and posts such as hers do make it onto there and become quite popular. (min. 5.39) Teodora believes that the "whales" (users with a lot of Steem Power - heavily invested into the platform) are responsible for that and that "catching their eye" is what could help an article become very popular. She does say that she is unsure of the present situation, as this seems to have changed as a result of last month's hardfork, which has brought about changes to the way in which posts gain visibility and exposure, scaling back some of the power that "whales" used to have (min. 6.45). She does identify these powerful accounts/ "whales" as potential gatekeepers and describes them as "the politicians in our world" (min. 7.05). With

regards to the platform's developers, Teodora believes they started out with a good concept but that the implementation was somewhat lacking. Asked if it is common on Steemit that travel bloggers receive financial incentives directly from businesses, in a way, sponsored posts, Teodora thinks that it is quite a common thing (min. 8.24). She says she can see more and more people on the platform that are trying to develop something between a travel blog and a business and doing deals with restaurants, cafes, hotels and that when they make a post about places they visit they might be getting something in return but she isn't exactly sure how these deals go down (min. 8.50). Teodora also mentioned that she is aware of some big travel agencies that already have representatives on Steemit, people that are blogging in the name of these businesses and that she's seen this quite often (min. 9.06). When asked if she thinks that the credibility of a post would be affected in the case of an author that made a travel post for which he/she might have received some kind of financial incentive, but that author is being transparent about it, Teodora believes that it would still have a negative influence on her perception regarding the credibility of that post regardless of the transparency, although she agrees that it could be possible to be paid and genuinely like what you are writing about (min. 10.15). She then discusses the prevalence of advertising, especially the targeted type and just how well-spread this issue is in today's world across all platforms, using Facebook as an example and stating that: "I don't see why Steemit would be different than any other platform" (min. 11.40).

5.3 Enrica

Enrica is a relatively new Steemit user who though engaged fast and started contributing a lot to the community by helping in organizing blockchain related events. She is quite active when it comes to posting as well, even though travel blogging is not her main focus. Her reputation between Steemit users is at an almost 'Guru' level now and she shares her views about credibility and travel blogging on Steemit. Firstly, she does think that Steemit is actually a good place to look for travel information (min. 2.00) and the main reason behind that would be that quite a lot of the people she is meeting in person at the Steemit events are 'professional' travelers and/or travel bloggers (min. 2.18), naming them 'digital nomads', a definition that 'entails they travel a lot' (min. 2.28). She considers the travel blogs of people she personally knows definitely

more credible than others (min. 3:40) and the reputation seems to be quite important to her when it comes to credibility as the higher it is the more dedication to the platform it shows (min. 4.59). She mentions that reputation shows how bloggers organically got to a certain point through dedication and commitment to the platform (min. 5.15). By 'organically' here she means more 'fairly' compared to those who got to the same point 'inorganically', by -for example- buying votes, which is not easy to tell since most of the times a personal research is necessary in order to define that (min. 5.53). Elaborating more into credibility criteria, besides reputation, Enrica mentions 'user's engagement' (min. 6.33) and 'genuine content' (min.6.53) as important factors to make her trust a travel post. By engagement here it is meant how the users interact with other users, by responding comments for instance (min. 7.08). She is always interested in who the author of the post is or find that out, of course depending on how she got to the point of noticing the post in the first place (min. 8.06), meaning if it came up on her feed (being subscribed to an account for example) or if someone she knows specifically recommended it (by sending it to her for example – min. 8.30). Regarding the trending section, Enrica mentions that when Steemit started there was only place for genuinely quality content in that section, but with vote buying this changed (min. 9.53). Now though, this is possibly re-adjusting again (min. 10.04) due to changes in the platform, 'for the better of the ecosystem' as she says (min. 10.17). When asked about exclusive or non-exclusive Steemit travel bloggers, Enrica believes there are both on the platform (min. 11.39). She does mention an extreme travel blogging example present on Steemit though (min. 13.20), about a famous travel blogger supposedly joining Steemit, who – she found out later – was not really the actual person, but someone pretending to be her for gain. Lastly, regarding sponsorships and the commercial aspect of travel blogging, Enrica thinks it happens less and not in conventional way on Steemit (min. 16.43), and even if it does in some cases it is really irrelevant if it is on Steemit or any other platform in her opinion (min. 17.41). On Steemit specifically are for 'big bloggers' who promote their Steemit related events for example (min. 18.30). When asked if she would consider a sponsored post less credible, she answered that she wouldn't as long as the sponsorship is transparent (min. 19.43) and that the commercial aspect of a post does not necessarily make it non-credible. Also, in her opinion, it is important if the

sponsorship has to do with the content of the travel post or not (min. 20.26), for example if it specifically mentions a certain hotel which is being promoted.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, the author analysed different aspects of credibility, focusing on credibility in the case of online travel blogs, showing that credibility is a multifaceted notion and a rather complex and difficult to define concept. Based on the extensive literature review we can see that different authors give different definitions of credibility and there is a large body of academic literature related to this subject, including tourism academic literature, but not exclusively. The focus of the researcher's discussion is credibility and electronic word of mouth in relation to online travel blogs, with particular emphasis on Steemit.com, a blockchain based online social media and blogging platform which is centered around a rather innovative reward system, where bloggers get compensated for their contributions in cryptocurrency based on various factors. The Steemit case study focuses specifically on travel blogging on the platform and how credible travel related posts are comparing to other similar online platforms, and what cues or details users and content creators alike use in order to attribute trust or determine if a source or author is credible to them.

By approaching three prominent Steemit users and conducting interviews with them related to travel blogging on the platform and credibility, it would appear that most people agree on certain criteria when defining credibility of a travel blog or post on Steemit: personal interaction, recommendations and reputation. Despite the relatively small number of interview participants, the author was able to extract some valuable data, since the three interviewees are knowledgeable Steemit users, with a high reputation (all three are at 'Professional' Status), engaging in travel blogging, exclusively or quite often and who have insight of credibility on the platform. The interview findings would be a great motive for further analysis when referring to credibility of online travel blogs. A lot of the ideas mentioned by the respondents with regards to

how they attribute credibility to posts and authors coincide with ideas found in the general body of credibility research discussed in the literature review.

This paper is mainly a credibility case study and the Steemit case was deemed to be a good example of recent developments in the online travel blogging scene, combining some of the latest innovations in online blogging. Through this relatively new way of social travel blogging, it can be suggested that the credibility of online travel blogs is constantly evolving into an even more multifaceted concept than before, built on new criteria, based on technological features. However, despite some subtle changes to the way in which individuals assign trust or decide what makes a source or article credible to them, it seems, al least from the limited amount of data collected, that much of this process has remained the same even when applied to new and innovative platforms such as Steemit. It is apparent that the design of the platform is somewhat flawed, at least when considering how the voting and reputation systems can be abused by powerful and sometimes unscrupulous actors, that can affect the otherwise open and transparent ecosystem that the developers tried to create. Although the developers seem to be addressing some of the issues surrounding voting abuse, nothing has so far been mentioned about addressing voting bots. It seems that users tend to give quite a lot of attention to the reputation system despite its shortcomings, still finding it to be a useful tool in determining just how credible an author is, although they are at least to some extent, aware of how it can be influenced and that some accounts resort to this kind of manipulation quite regularly, artificially inflating their reputation on the platform through the use of various aforementioned tools.

Further research could be conducted on this matter, perhaps on a larger number of Steemit travel bloggers and perhaps taking into consideration the views of the developer team behind the project in order to better understand the rather complex issue of credibility.

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