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**PROSUMER-CITIZENSHIP AND THE LOCAL:
A CRITICAL CASE STUDY OF CONSUMER REVIEWING ON YELP.COM**

A Dissertation in

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by

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, content developers searching for new markets have found a potentially lucrative consumer base in local and location-based services as new media platforms have begun to “expand” their focus to hyper-local place-based communities. This shift to “local 2.0” has given birth to “local listing sites,” an emerging social medium that converges the content of traditional Yellow Pages, consumer-generated content and the interactive features of social network sites. Such sites harness the productive power of “prosumers,” the hybrid subjectivity of new media users who simultaneously produce and consume online content (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). These sites capitalize on the productivity of users who create discourses *through and about* local consumption by voluntarily rating and reviewing local businesses and services, challenging the power of institutions traditionally responsible for the production of consumer culture and reputation management (e.g., local business owners, marketers, advertisers, professional critics).

Theoretical perspectives on the power of prosumption vary across academic scholarship; on the one end of this debate are techno-utopians who believe prosumption empowers consumers whose choices have been long constrained by a top-down corporate culture and marketing industry (e.g., Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2007). On the other end, critical scholars position consumer-generated content as a form of free labor and thus tend to view prosumption as an inherently exploitative practice (e.g., Andrejevic, 2007; Cohen, 2008; van Dijck, 2009). Yet while the theoretical positions on prosumption are divisive, empirical research on these debates is comparatively limited – particularly as it pertains to how prosumers negotiate their role as content producers in the digital economy.

This dissertation aims to fill the lack of empirical prosumption research with an investigation of the practice of consumer-reviewing as a form of prosumption on the local listing site Yelp.com – a social networking site and local listing guide that allows consumers to rate and review local businesses and services in their community. This project aims to understand how consumers-as-media-producers experience and make sense of their productive activity through this emerging social media format, as well as the mediating role that *localism* plays in this process. Yelp offers up a unique opportunity to not only appropriate prosumption as a form of consumer-citizenship but to reconnect people through a *local*, place-based identification through social and political action. Thus, this research also explores how prosumption in the “virtual” impacts offline behaviors in the “real.”

This project is a study in three parts; the first section begins with a critical discourse analysis of Yelp’s promotional campaign and site architecture that investigates how the site rhetorically and structurally enables and delimits prosumer agency and power. The second section offers a textual analysis of consumer reviews in order to demonstrate how Yelp structures participation to primarily articulate prosumers as *customers* over [local] *citizens*; the third part analyzes interviews conducted with active Yelpers and argues that consumer reviewing, as a form of prosumption, is a complex and conflicting practice. While consumer reviewing is not *inherently* empowering or exploitative, its potential to serve as a form of consumer-citizenship is decidedly limited. Interviews reveal that although Yelpers negotiate and contest the discursive constraints placed on prosumption by the site’s architectures of participation, these same users also *rationalize* and identify with the site’s exploitative tendencies. As such, Yelp is ultimately treated as “not the place” for articulating the politics of consumption which suggest limitations in

the transformative capabilities of this prosumption practice. While counter-discourses are at times employed, Yelpers ultimately work to reproduce hegemonic discourses of consumption.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In 2009, a man with the online profile name “Sean C”¹ wrote and posted a negative review about an independent bookstore on Yelp.com – a social networking website and local listing guide that allows consumers to rate and review local businesses and services in their community. Rating the bookstore two out of five stars, he wrote:

This place is a TOTAL MESS with minimal organization of titles or subjects. There are books stacked everywhere – blocking the shelves. Why would someone want a travel guide from 1982?? I’ve been in here twice and both times left empty handed. I think this place needs to close down for a few days and do a thorough cleaning and organization and get rid of all the crap!

Shortly after posting the review on Yelp, Sean C began receiving a number of personal messages from the bookstore’s owner through his Yelp account which began with the note: “What’s the problem why are you writing so many mean things? Do you not have a girlfriend? Are you divorced? I can see why...” Harassing messages from the store owner became increasingly frequent and insulting, calling Sean C “stupid,” “an idiot,” “low class,” “trash,” a “pussy” and the product of a “bad family” whose “mom was a bitch and didn’t teach you how to behave” (Smiley, 2009). Using the bits of personal information posted to his Yelp profile, the bookstore owner tracked down Sean C’s address to confront him at home about the review. After allegedly pushing her way inside his house, a physical altercation ensued; Sean C had the woman arrested and obtained a restraining order against her the following day (issuing the restraining order office a five-star Yelp review). The following day, Sean C also updated his original Yelp review of the bookstore that not only disclosed the above altercation but linked the account to official news

¹ User names have not been given pseudonyms since all Yelp content is publicly accessible.

stories, including screenshots of the owner's threatening emails. His profile name now reads, "Sean 'Don't come to my house uninvited' C."

While this is clearly an exceptional case, it does perhaps suggest a growing anxiety amongst business owners who feel they are losing control as consumers hastily and regularly broadcast their feelings and experiences in the online media environment. If one man's opinion in a city of 700,000 potential customers mattered that much to a single bookstore owner, what does this suggest about the power that social media platforms afford consumers acting in consort? If a single review about a store's clutter can elicit such a strong reaction, what kind of reaction might *lots* of reviews about a business's service, product quality, work conditions, discriminatory practices or environmental record produce? Can consumer-reviewing be used towards *political* ends and if so, what potential do such sites have for engaging consumers as citizens? Furthermore, how does this play out on the local level, where citizens are criticizing the central political and economic resources (e.g., employment providers, public services, tourist destinations) within their communities? In what ways do these *online* practices merge or conflict with the everyday *offline* lived experiences of its users, and to what extent are citizen-consumers-as-media-producer-consumers empowered by such activities? These are some of the larger questions that inform this dissertation's research on consumer-reviewing, citizenship and the local.

Situating the Research(er)

I have always had a fascination with the relationship between consumer culture and citizenship, compounded by an interest in all things local. This began early on with my interest in non-commercial radio as a teenager where small, low-power stations run by community volunteers were central to my own identify formation and *lifestyle politics* (Bennett, 2004).

Looking back, I realize that in many ways these programs were really just a terrestrial form of user-generated content and *prosumption* (Toffler, 1980) in that programs were produced by the very [unpaid] community members who also consumed them. This medium inspired my own desire for community engagement, and by the time I had the opportunity to participate I wanted to give others that same experience. As a volunteer radio disc jockey and manager for a non-commercial station in the 1990s I felt empowered by the ability to “generate content” – to broadcast my thoughts in the way that I wanted, not in a pre-scripted format handed down by some top-level media executive (although that came years later during a brief stint in commercial radio). Whether or not we were effective, my peers and I genuinely sought to harness the power of non-commercial radio to enact social, cultural and political change. We felt empowered by the *access* that radio afforded so we promoted events, played “independent” music, aimed for demographics that mainstream media ignored, and encouraged other station personnel to do the same. And some did. Yet there were always those who took the tools provided to reproduce the commercial aesthetic with a popular music playlist, the oral intonation of top 40 jocks, and even (illegally) using the airwaves to line their own pockets by selling ads or products on-air (usually in a language other than English so the managers wouldn’t know!). My research agenda has thus always been centered in some ways around media’s political possibilities in a hyper-mediated consumer culture, and the attempts people make (or do not make) to harness the power of communication to either reject or reproduce hegemonic ideologies; why some people agitate for change and others do not. While mass media and communications have the *potential* to democratize, they must be first be *used towards this end* (or: you can only lead a horse to water...).

Fast forward from 1998 to 2010; I am at the bottom of a mile-long dusty, rocky hill (also an adequate metaphor for contemporary radio) on the western shore of Costa Rica signing out of a *very* small, ten-room “hotel” when the woman working at the front desk hands me a business card and asks in broken English if I would please tell others about my stay; on the back of the card she had written: “www.TripAdvisor.com.” It surprised me that such a remotely located hotel (with dial-up internet and no potable water) would not only *know* about TripAdvisor but *rely* on positive web-based consumer reviews for business. If it mattered here, where else did it matter? I started wondering at that point how consumer-generated content (particularly reviews) affected *other* areas of consumption in everyday life; how did it shape people’s movement through space or their interactions with other local community members – fellow citizens who also happened to be business owners? Could consuming citizens with insider knowledge or a personal experience about a particular establishment use online consumer reviews to agitate for a change in problematic or exploitative business practices? Were consumer reviews, like non-commercial radio and its lax managerial oversight, a communicative opportunity that could be harnessed towards productive ends? Or, like many of the participants in non-commercial radio, would they merely reproduce hegemonic articulations of consumerism? What opportunities might discourses about local consumption experiences open up for social, cultural and political change?

Much scholarship has examined the historical and contemporary relationship between consumer culture and citizenship (i.e., “the politics of consumption”) (e.g., Cohen, 2001, 2003; Daunton & Hilton, 2001; Jubas, 2007; Littler, 2009; Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti & Stolle, 2005; Soper, 2007; Trentmann, 2007); however, such research has only begun to consider this relationship in the context of social media and online environments (Harold, 2007; Jenkins,

2006). Focusing on new media research, much of the literature on Internet users who appropriate social media to elaborate on their consumer experiences tends to be administrative studies that look at the influence user-generated content² has on the purchasing decisions of consumers (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Duan, Gu & Whinston, 2008; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Liu, 2006; Pattison, 2009; Zhang, Ye, Law & Li, 2010). These typically take the form of marketing research studies aimed at evaluating, honing and suggesting advertising or branding strategies with the end-goal of selling more goods. Alternatively, critical research focuses more on the exploitative tendencies that participatory consumption serves in creating more efficient means of surveillance and social control from the free labor of users who willingly produce content for companies without pay (e.g., Andrejevic, 2007; Cohen, 2008; Deuze, 2007; van Dijck, 2009).³ In between marketing and critical research are the more techno-utopian perspectives that celebrate the unprecedented forms of power and control that interactive web technologies afford media users and consumers whose choices have been long constrained by top-down corporate culture (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Bruns, 2008; Jenkins). In this literature, the practices emerging from these technologies (e.g., consumer reviews) indicate a paradigm shift marked by the conflation of production and consumption practices – in other words, *prosumption* – which until recently have been understood as separate spheres of activity (Bruns; Jenkins; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Toffler, 1980).⁴ From this perspective, scholars theorize that the activities of consumer-producers (i.e., prosumers) are democratizing communication and culture as new media users appropriate the capitalist modes of production to shift relations of power back into the hands of consumers.

² I use the term “user-generated content” and “consumer-generated content” interchangeably.

³ From this perspective, the political economy of new media and interactive digital technologies aims to harness and commodify the productive consumption of new media users towards their own exploitation.

⁴ Or, more accurately, production and consumption have not been viewed as separate spheres since prior to the rise of industrialization (see Toffler, 1980). See Chapter Two for an explanation of this point.

This research situates itself somewhere in between the critical and techno-utopian continuum as it pertains to the relationship between prosumption and empowerment, consumer-citizenship and the local; however, it does not attempt to make recommendations for “better use” or contribute to marketing research. Instead, it intends to fill some of the theoretical gaps and considerations unaddressed by new media studies research that addresses the potential for consumer-produced media to serve as a form of consumer-citizenship at the *local* level. Such research has only begun to address the relationship between *online* practices and the *offline* lived experiences, or theorize these “spaces” as interrelated rather than separate “worlds” (Mitra & Schwartz, 2001; Orgad, 2005). At the time of writing, I do not know of any studies that look at the role prosumption (and, specifically, consumer-reviewing) plays in merging “private” consumption experiences of locals with their “public” role as citizens. I have also been unable to locate work that investigates the relationship between consumer-reviewing in the context of the *local web*, or studies that focus specifically on the relationship between consumer-reviewing, consumer-citizenship, and place-based communities. While much has been written about prosumption on a *global* or *national* level (e.g., Anderson, 2008, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), little research has accounted for its potential impact on local economies.⁵ Other studies on participatory forms of user-generated content tend to approach these activities through samples limited to convenience, nationality (e.g., Kalmus, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Runnel & Siibak, 2009), age, or generation (boyd, 2007; Livingstone, 2008). So how might consumer-reviewers perceive their power as content producers in a space where even one

⁵ At the time of writing I have not been able to locate any research on the impact consumer reviews have on local economies. However, there is a growing body of research that suggests online reviews impact the purchasing decisions of others; a number of empirical studies indicate a correlation between consumer reviews and product sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Duan, Gu & Whinston, 2008; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Liu, 2006; Zhang, Ye, Law & Li, 2010). This correlation might suggest a relationship between consumer reviews and local businesses, but I am not aware of any research on this topic to date.

negative review can have significant economic consequences (e.g., an independent mom-and-pop already struggling in the face of increasing consolidation, globalization and an economic recession) (Haberkorn, 2006)?⁶ Thus, accounting for the place-based *local* context is one major gap in the literature this dissertation intends to fill.

Yet while the theoretical positions on prosumption and consumer-citizenship remain divisive and underexplored, empirical or interpretive research has also been somewhat limited. The notion of an active, productive consumer base is still largely theoretical and abstract, particularly in the fields of communications and media studies. While marketing research has offered some empirical evidence for how consumers produce and engage in electronic word-of-mouth activity (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; O'Connor, 2008), fewer studies explore the implications of consumer-reviewing on consumer perceptions of agency and power. The notion of agency and power is often *assumed* in studies about prosumption rather than quantitatively or qualitatively assessing if – or how – these perceptions are experienced by prosumers themselves. Furthermore, current research also tends to overlook the processes and social practices behind prosumption– particularly as it pertains to consumer-produced information and content production. For as much as we know about the limitations and potential power of participatory consumption, we know comparatively less about how consumer-citizens themselves perceive or experience this spectrum of possibilities in any clearly defined way. Therefore, the general lack of empirical and interpretive research that connects participatory modes of consumption and consumer-citizenship is yet another shortcoming of the literature.

As inferred above, another limitation in new media research is that the relationship between prosumers and their *offline* consumption practices are often understated. In other words,

⁶ This inattention is surprising considering that as early as 2006, local listing sites were reported as cutting into the \$15 billion spent annually by companies on printed phone book advertisements (Haberkorn, 2006).

research on prosumption tends to more frequently focus on aspects of *production*, but fails to address *consumption* in any real form. Much of this research also tends to be quantitative pencil-and-paper surveys based on convenience samples that aim to understand variance in motivations for producing content online and as a result, do not investigate what type of content or discourse these users produce (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kalmus et al., 2009; Leung, 2009; O'Connor, 2008). Although convenient, such research fails to get at the complexity of experience, user/producer/consumer perceptions and processes, and the social practices behind content creation that qualitative methods of data collection might illuminate.

All considered, this dissertation aims to make two contributions to the literature which is inspired not only by my own research agenda but by the gaps identified above. One, I aim to uncover the possibilities that prosumption – through the form of consumer-reviewing – contributes to a *local* politics of consumption. In doing so, this project opens up critical Internet research by turning away from the global possibilities new media affords and *towards* the myriad ways digital media are shaping the lived experience in our own backyards. Additionally, by bridging the specific activity of consumer-reviewing with theories of consumer-citizenship, this project addresses Leung's (2009) critique that argues a major shortcoming of empirical research on consumer-generated content is that it fails to account for *specific types* of content creation; thus, focusing prosumption on consumer-reviewers attempts to rectify this tendency. A second contribution of this project is that it offers a critical *prosumer* perspective; user experiences and perceptions of consumer-reviewing's social, cultural and political possibilities are not limited to mere "celebrations" of empowerment but rather are critically situated against arguments about prosumer agency and exploitation. This research therefore straddles the contentious realms of structure and agency; it does not just assign prosumers to a state of unprecedented empowerment

or false consciousness but also aims to account for structural factors that influence participation in desired ways (e.g., web architecture, promotional discourse). This project is thus in part an attempt at understanding the ways prosumers negotiate structures, while expanding the research on presumption to account for local listing sites as an emerging social media format. In addition to building on the existing literature, I hope to offer empirical evidence from a critical qualitative approach that yields a more nuanced understanding of the social practices and perceptions of presumption, consumer-citizenship and the local.

Through a case study of the consumer-review site Yelp.com, I conducted a qualitative study with the goal of understanding how consumers-as-media-producers experience and make sense of their productive activity through this emerging social media format. This research investigates how consumers harness the power of presumption in the form of consumer reviews and to what ends. Specifically, I look at the *potential* this medium affords towards engaging locals as citizen-consumers and evaluate not only the type of discourse they create and promote, but how these prosumers view these practices themselves. To answer these questions I spent a year collecting and analyzing data from Yelp, reading reviews, becoming a reviewer myself, and interviewing other Yelp reviewers (henceforth referred to as “Yelpers”) on their consumer-reviewing uses and practices. Having become a Yelper myself over the course of this project, I situated myself as both observer and participant; through the process of writing reviews I came to better understand the *potential* and limitations of this tool. In the process of connecting with others, I built a small network that allowed me to experience all facets of the site that I may not have otherwise discovered.

Informed by my experience as a Yelper, this study is broken into three interrelated parts. Part one analyzes the promises of empowerment proffered by Yelp’s promotional discourse in

the context of the technological affordances the site makes available through its “architectures of participation” (O’Reilly, 2005); the goal here is to better understand how the site discursively constructs participation and to what ends. Part two draws upon critical theories of consumption and consumer-citizenship to employ a discourse analysis of how prosumers *write* reviews, and part three turns towards a user study that aims to better understand how Yelpers perceive consumer-reviewing, its potential for consumer-citizenship and how it mediates relationships with their local, place-based communities. This case study concludes with an integrative analysis of these three parts in order to account for the tensions that emerge between not only the site’s commercial business model and citizen-consumers, but Yelp and Yelping as a site and source of both empowerment and exploitation.

The rest of this chapter offers a historically-bound technological context in order to situate this case study and the larger research questions outlined above in what I refer to as the emerging “local web.” I will also discuss why I have selected Yelp as my site of analysis, which is supported with a short history and political economic analysis of the company; the latter reveals a number of implications and considerations for the local web which are relevant not only for this particular project, but future studies like it. I then conclude with a summary of chapters that outlines the remainder of this dissertation.

Setting the Context: The Emerging “Local Web”

Over the past decade, the market of web companies hosting consumer-to-consumer reviews of “experience goods” has rapidly expanded (O’Connor, 2008).⁷ While many of these sites offer globally available branded products, content developers looking for new markets have

⁷ Experience goods are defined as goods or services that cannot be judged for quality until consumed (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007).

found a potentially lucrative consumer base in local and location-based services. Consumer-to-consumer informational sites in particular are tapping into the “disruptive innovation” (Christensen, 2003) of “local 2.0” to redirect attention from widely available name brands and experiences to smaller, local businesses and services.⁸ One outgrowth of the local 2.0 movement is what I refer to as the genre of “local listing sites,” an emerging social medium that converges the content of traditional Yellow Pages with the interactive features of social network sites. While each website hosts different features, most local listing sites rely on consumers to produce content via reviews, photo uploads, discussion boards and forums. Some also capitalize on the productive power of social networks by allowing users to maintain and display “friend” lists. Companies like Yelp!, TripAdvisor, Loopt, Placeblogger, Judy’s Book, Angie’s List, InsiderPages and Citysearch mark some of the most successful participatory websites that focus on hyper-local content through an interactive social media platform. These sites are distinct from other consumer-review sites (e.g., Amazon, IMDB) in that they draw upon a locally-oriented form of participatory consumption as the basis for their content – many do not even offer goods or services for sale. Instead, local listing sites aim to harness the power of productive consumers from within the same geographical location who will create reviews of businesses, recreational facilities, doctors, lawyers, transportation and other services that they have visited or “consumed” within their local community.

While the act of consumer reviewing is certainly not new, this research argues that local listing sites have emerged within a larger historical and cultural context specific to the

⁸ By *disruptive innovation* I refer to Christensen’s work that describes technological innovations introduced to the market by small or entrant firms (e.g., tech start-ups) that effectively replace or “disrupt” the existing market dominated by larger, established firms. Yelp, for example, is a disruptive technology or innovation in that it replaces the local-listings market long dominated by the Yellow Pages. While Yelp is not the first web-based local listing site, its innovative use of social networking and other interactive Web 2.0 technological affordances has given the site a technological advantage over its competitors Citysearch and InsiderPages.

contemporary political economy (if not a context mutually constituted by the political economy) (Mosco, 2009). Alongside myriad international political, economic and ecological disasters over the past few years, a cynical populism has emerged that is increasingly critical towards many aspects of the global political economy.⁹ Provoked in part by this larger political economic context, a shifting social zeitgeist has surfaced in which global societies and cultures seem to be [re]turning “inwards” – away from the global and back towards the *local*. The popular press, trade publications and marketing firms in fact regularly describe the trend in “living local” as “the new global” or “the new black” (e.g., Faith Popcorn, 2010; Rubin, 2010). Futurist marketing firm Faith Popcorn, for instance, predicted the year 2010 as “Year of the Lo-Co” or “local cocooning,” where “a world turned upside down drives us inward” (Faith Popcorn). Consequently, the “local” has become both buzzword and fad across a number of industries and movements in the first decade of the 21st century (e.g. in the agriculture, environmental, commerce, digital and mobile technology industries, to name a few).

Local listing sites are therefore one manifestation of this shift that is in part guided by, if not inspired by, technological innovations in locative media where both telecommunications and technology firms have begun to focus less on the web’s global capacity and more on hyper or micro-local communities.¹⁰ Current innovations in the mobile and digital technology sector, for example, have largely centered on locative or location-based developments that harness new possibilities made possible by advancements in geolocational resources (e.g., GPS, GIS). E-

⁹ While I do not intend to suggest a cause-effect or deterministic relationship here, “too big to fail” has undeniably become an increasingly suspect and unwarranted claim. Between two international wars, global economic recession, bank bailouts and corporate corruption, the housing bust, record-high food prices, the BP oil spill, the recall of poisonous children’s toys from China, and countless other instances, a common critique of the faceless multinational corporate enterprise is that the firm’s only local interest is to financially increase its global interest.

¹⁰ I distinguish between “hyper-local” and “micro-local” in that that the former refers to the local as in the immediate community – in other words, city, township or regional affiliation (as opposed to state, nation or cultural citizenship). By “micro-local” I refer to sites that break down the hyper-local into even smaller parts – for example, a specific neighborhood section or city block. There are websites that appeal to both formations of the local.

commerce is increasingly focused on hyper-local content and search, potentially rendering traditional avenues of knowledge acquisition and information-gathering obsolete. Local listing sites are a significant part of this shift, and are usurping traditional modes of commerce, advertising, marketing and search. For example, it is likely that the Yellow Pages' "pay-to-play" model will be altogether replaced with free online resources valorized by [unpaid] consumer-generated ratings and reviews in the upcoming years.¹¹

Why Yelp?

One of the most popular local listing sites to hit the market is Yelp.com (www.yelp.com), which merges traditional Yellow Pages content with social networking features into a consumer resource designed to "connect people with great local businesses" (Yelp Official Blog, 2010). As a website dedicated to consumer-driven electronic word-of-mouth, Yelp provides a space for community members to rate and review local businesses and services – from restaurants and gas stations to dentists and the post office. As a free service, Yelp is based on the idea that the best and most trusted recommendations for things to do, places to go and what services to employ typically come from family, friends, or colleagues – not advertisers, marketers or others with ulterior motives. Yelp thus serves as a virtual space that is not governed by the compromised

¹¹ For example, start-ups breaking into the "local 2.0" market offer information on services and activities specific to a particular city, neighborhood or city block (e.g., MyFrontSteps, AroundMe). Even major media conglomerates that have systematically dismantled their obligations to the local for its unprofitability have begun to see the value in hyper-local content. Over the past two years, a number of big media companies have either acquired or partnered with sites dedicated to strictly "local" content. For example, CNN/Turner Broadcasting has a partnership with Outside.in Inc., a hyper-local news site that aggregates and dispatches locally relevant news and blogs according to neighborhood or city block. American Online (AOL) similarly launched its own local news project after acquiring two start-ups in 2009 – Patch Media Corporation, a hyper-local news site for small towns, and Going Inc., a social calendar and networking site for nightlife and cultural events in metropolitan areas (Ovide, 2009; Schonfeld, 2009). MSNBC also purchased the micro-local news site, EveryBlock.com in 2009, a start-up that produces news feeds, ads and business reviews according to city block in 16 different U.S. urban communities (Holovaty, 2009). Both Google and Microsoft have both expressed interest in the local content industry in their attempt to purchase Yelp at separate points, with Google ultimately launching its own local listing search function, Google Places.

opinions of professional reviewers or advertisers, but by reviews based on the experience of “real” community members.

As one of the most popular local listing sites with a rapidly growing user base, Yelp logged 50 million unique visitors a month as of March 2011 (“About Yelp,” 2011).¹² In 2011 the site ranked as the 38th most trafficked website in the United States (Alexa, 2011); its noted popularity amongst trendsetters and lucrative demographics has already cut into the web traffic of competing local listing sites like Citysearch (Graham, 2008).¹³ Despite critiques for its youthful demographics, the site contends that 94% of Yelp reviewers are over 23-years-old with 81% of its users under the age of 50-years-old (“An Introduction,” 2011). A bulk of the Yelp community is also made up of young professionals, with 64% of the site’s users earning incomes over \$60,000 (36% earn over \$100,000) (“An Introduction”).

While Yelp is not the first consumer-driven local listing site to have appeared online, I chose it over its predecessors for its popularity, rapid growth, social relevance, “community” emphasis and “local” focus;¹⁴ the company also exemplifies some of the techno-utopian claims associated with Web 2.0 technologies and user-generated content specifically (this is analyzed at length in Chapter Three). The site regularly purports the “democratizing” potential for consumer reviews which is perhaps best indicated by their trademarked slogan, “Real People, Real Reviews” (Hansell, 2008). Additionally, the site emphasizes two primary features: consumer control and *localism*. Yelpers actively shape discourse around *local* consumption, which is an

¹² When I began this research in January 2010, Yelp reported a little more than half that amount at 30 million monthly visitors. The site grows by several million visitors each month.

¹³ The Outlaw Marketing firm ranked Yelp as the 15th most frequently visited “Generation Y” website in 2008 (Outlaw, 2008).

¹⁴ Predecessors to Yelp would include Angie’s List (a subscription-based consumer-review site that started in 1995 as an “offline” service guide), Citysearch (founded in 1996) and Judy’s Book (founded in 2004). Additionally, the Zagat Guide has long relied on consumer ratings of restaurants since 1979 and has since moved onto the web, as well. While a full history of consumer-reviewing lies outside the scope of this paper, I want to be clear that Yelp is not the first of its kind but rather purposefully selected for the reasons outlined above.

important distinction from other consumer review sites; its local emphasis is also a central part of the website's desired appeal, promotion and design. Unlike other local listing sites, Yelp privileges the average consumer's written opinion over the professional reviewer or critic and prides itself on putting consumer reviews first and foremost. Yelp does pay some of its contributors to produce content; for example, "Scouts" or "Ambassadors" are paid to help Yelp break into new markets, while "Community Managers" act as local Yelp liaisons in 42 major cities to organize events and foster relationships between Yelpers and local businesses. However, the site does not favor, order or filter the reviews of its paid employees as done on competing sites (e.g., Citysearch, Angie's List).

The History of Yelp

Yelp began in 2004 as the brainchild of Jeremy Stoppelman and Russel Simmons, two former PayPal employees¹⁵ in their late twenties who came up with the idea while working for "MRL Ventures," an internet incubator started by PayPal co-founder Max Levchin (Carlsen, 2006).¹⁶ Levchin founded MRL Ventures after selling PayPal to eBay in 2002 for \$1.5 billion (at the age of 26), and recruited Stoppelman and Simmons shortly after to help brainstorm and launch new tech start-ups out of the incubator. Stoppelman, Yelp's CEO and co-founder, has described MRL Ventures as:

...an incubator of about ten people... it was like a little fun factory. Every day we came

¹⁵ Stoppelman left PayPal as the Vice President of Engineering for Harvard Business School in 2003 but dropped out after a year to work for the incubator and subsequently, run Yelp. Simmons had worked as Chief Architect at PayPal.

¹⁶ A major function of internet incubators is to brainstorm and foster the development of start-ups from inception to fruition, giving them a home amongst other start-up firms. Such organizations work as "accelerators – hot boxes where companies can rocket from idea to launch in just 90 to 180 days" (Singer, 2000, p. 1). Internet incubators thus serve as a creative and engineering "think tank" to generate, develop and finance technology start-ups with small amounts of seed money aimed at reaping huge returns on investment.

in we were brainstorming about what could be next in the world of consumer internet, what would be another useful service. And out of a conversation that I had one day, I think it was actually [Levchin's] birthday lunch, I was speaking to my now co-founder Russ Simmons and we came up with this idea for Yelp. (Valerio, 2010)

The concept for Yelp emerged from one of these brainstorming sessions, although accounts of its origins are often inconsistent in the press. Some reports quote Stoppelman as stating the idea came in a “eureka moment” while trying to find the best pizza in San Francisco (Yelp, Inc., 2006); elsewhere, he recalls the idea emerging out of a frustrated search for a local doctor (Stoppelman, 2009a). Other times, the idea is attributed to a discussion held at Levchin's birthday party (Valerio, 2010).¹⁷ Regardless, Yelp did not actually appear “out of nowhere” as often alluded in the popular press but rather emerged from the alumni network of Silicon Valley in which most of the region's economic ties “are those forged by technophiles who worked together at the same company” (Enochs, 2006).

Funding for Yelp began with a one-million dollar initial investment by Levchin as part of the incubator's terms of agreement; Levchin also introduced Stoppelman and Simmons to other venture capitalists to assist in the pursuit of additional financing – many of which also have ties to their original PayPal network (which they self-reflexively refer to as the “PayPal Mafia”).¹⁸

¹⁷ While this may seem petty, the inconsistency is precarious given the irony of Yelp's democratizing promotional rhetoric and consumption-oriented focus (detailed in Chapter Three). For example, Stoppelman authored an op-ed in 2009 that opened with the statement: “I wondered why it was so easy to find consumer reviews for products like books and electronics, but so hard to find good referrals for local service providers like doctors and plumbers” (Stoppelman, 2009a). If “local services” are such a central function of the site, this does not explain how or why Yelp has systematically promoted its development towards a more entertainment and consumption-oriented experience focused on restaurants, beauty salons and entertainment.

¹⁸ By “original” I mean pre-sale to eBay. Yelp's board of directors is dominated by its early investors. Leading Yelp's board of directors is Levchin himself, the PayPal co-founder and owner of the internet incubator from which Yelp emerged. Levchin's initial \$1 million in funding for the start-up is quite small in comparison to the capital obtained in later stages of development, yet his role as a board member secures his continued influence over the firm's growth.

For example, former PayPal employee Keith Rabois,¹⁹ a current executive at the professional social networking site LinkedIn, assisted Stoppelman with hiring computer engineers and preparing his venture-funding proposals (Enochs, 2006). Levchin's incubator also helped Stoppelman establish and solidify relationships with venture capitalist Reid Hoffman, another former PayPal employee and LinkedIn CEO, as well as venture capitalist and PayPal co-founder, Peter Thiel²⁰ (who, at the time of writing in 2011, also sits on Facebook's Board of Directors) (Enochs). Out of this social network Yelp created a number of business partnerships and relationships with hedge funds, financiers and successful technology start-ups. As a result, Yelp has a myriad of direct ties to some of the early 21st Century's biggest start-up web companies and disruptive innovations (Christensen, 2003) including LinkedIn, Facebook, Google, YouTube, Slide, Inc. (founded by Levchin through MRL Ventures which he sold to Google in 2010 for \$228 million), YouNoodle,²¹ several hedge fund and venture capital firms,²² California's Schwarzenegger Administration and the neo-conservative think tank, American Enterprise Institute.²³

¹⁹ As a Sequoia Technology Partner at Sequoia Capital, Rabois owns equity in every VC-financed consumer Internet company founded by former PayPal employees. His involvement in Yelp dates back to 2005 where he served as an early investor and advisor. In addition to a number of advisory and board positions on start-up technology companies like SquareUp (an online aggregate marketplace started by Twitter founder, Jack Dorsey), Vendio (an online aggregate marketplace), and Xoom (an international online money transfer system).

²⁰ Peter Thiel also owns the hedge fund Clarium Capital; in addition to Yelp he is also an investor in some of today's largest technology start-ups including his early \$500,000 investment in Facebook now valued at over \$1 billion (O'Brien, 2007). Politically and economically, Thiel is also known for his anti-establishment, libertarian worldview which has inspired a \$3.5 million donation to the Methuselah Foundation, a life-extension-research organization run by the controversial academic Aubrey de Grey (who believes humans will one day live to be 1,000 years old). Thiel also sits on the board of the Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence which focuses on cyborg technology.

²¹ PayPal co-founders Levchin and Thiel both serve as advisors to YouNoodle, a "start-up predictor" that aims to eliminate the errors of human rationality by assembling data for aiding venture capitalists in better investment decisions informed by quantitative models - not by "humans meeting each other and making a decision" (Goodson quoted in Tyler, 2008).

²² These include Clarium Capital (a hedge fund owned by Thiel), Sequoia Capital (in which Rabois serves as a Technology Partner), Benchmark Capital, Bessemer Venture Capital and Elevation Partners which all have investments in Yelp.

²³ Of noteworthy mention is also Yelp's Vice President of Corporate Communication Vince Sollitto, the ex-PayPal Vice President of Communications who helped administer PayPal's sale to eBay. Sollitto has served as a spokesman and chief deputy secretary for California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, U.S. Senator Jon Kyl (R – AZ), and

Yelp's ability to draw upon the "PayPal Mafia" alumni network and other Silicon Valley funding organizations is one major advantage that internet incubators like Levchin's provide new start-ups. As Stoppelman notes, "The better connected you are in the [Silicon] valley's social network the easier it is to get things done" (Enochs, para 15). In the press coverage pertaining to Yelp between 2004 and 2010, however, few relate Yelp's quick growth to its political economic relationships, PayPal social network, directorate ties or incubator origins (i.e., that Yelp inorganically emerged from within a business designed to foster such projects).²⁴ Yelp has remained private, however, rejecting a bid from Google in 2009 for a \$500 million acquisition²⁵ and an alleged bid from Microsoft for \$700 million (Yarrow, 2010).²⁶ Meanwhile, the company has secured a total of \$56 million in venture capital and has been valued at \$475 million by Elevation Partners, the last company to offer an investment in 2010 (Yarrow).²⁷ While no

Representative Chris Cox (R – CA), as well as the Communications Director for the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security. Sollitto also serves as communications chief for the American Enterprise Institute, a non-partisan, neo-conservative think tank dedicated to defending the principles and institutions "of American freedom and democratic capitalism." Members of AEI were also heavily involved in writing and advising the second Bush administration's public policy.

²⁴ Internet incubators are a relatively under-discussed Silicon Valley institution but are responsible for some of the "bottom-up" technological innovations that have emerged in recent years. Unlike traditional investment firms, for instance, incubators offer less initial finance capital (typically between \$250,000 to \$1 million) but offer many more resources for development such as a space for cross-communication with other start-ups, business advice, financial connections, ready access to high-level personnel and management infrastructure services. Incubators also have the personnel available to put on the boards of new companies and are thereby able to be represented on numerous companies' boards all at once. Member companies, however, ultimately must relinquish a large percentage of equity in exchange for the incubators' contributions which can range between 5% to more than 70%, depending on the services funding provided. The advantage of these kinds of networks – for example, the overlay between industrial, legal, venture capital and university networks – provide technology start-ups with this access a distinct advantage over those that do not have ready access to these relationships (Enochs, 2006).

²⁵ Yarrow reports \$550 million, but most other reports have stated \$500 million.

²⁶ The public market has been largely closed to tech start-ups in the past few years. Social networking site Twitter similarly rejected an acquisition offer from Facebook in 2008, while Facebook itself has also repeatedly turned down buy-out offers from Microsoft, Yahoo and Viacom.

²⁷ Series A financing began with \$1 million from MRL Ventures in 2004 in which Max Levchin joined Yelp's Board of Directors (BOD); Yelp secured \$5 million in Series B financing from Bessemer Ventures in November 2005 in which Jeremy Levine joined Yelp's BOD; Series C financing of \$10 million from Benchmark Capital made Peter Fenton a Board Member in November 2006 followed by another \$15 million in Series D in February 2008 from DAG Ventures. The last installment of financing came from Elevation Partners in January 2010 in the amount of \$25 million which placed Marc Bodnick on Yelp's BOD. Elevation Partners also promised Yelp an additional \$75 million to buy back stock from long-term employees and other shareholders, bringing the company's total financing to just over \$130 million (Rao, 2010).

“official” numbers have been released by the company itself, industry insiders speculate that Yelp began earning profits in 2009 at \$30 million with the expectation of \$50 million in 2010 (Arrington, 2009).

Yelp built its presence in the San Francisco community until 2008 when it opened its second office in New York City and its first international office in Canada shortly thereafter. Since then, the site has expanded internationally with additional offices in Arizona, London, Ireland, France, Austria, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands, positioning the company as a global leader in the local listing site market (Yelp Official Blog, 2010). The site has also expanded into the cellular market with a number of location-based mobile applications that enable users to locate businesses, contact information, ratings and review content from their phones. As of 2011, over one-third of Yelp searches occur over their mobile feature (“An Introduction,” 2011).

Business Structure and Revenue Streams

Despite acquisition offers from Google and Microsoft, Yelp remains an independent company based out of Silicon Valley run by a well-connected board of directors as outlined above (see also footnotes 18 through 27). The site relies predominantly on its consumers to generate content, aside from the temporary Ambassadors hired to break into new markets, and Community Managers who act as liaisons and organize local “Yelp Elite Squads” in metropolitan areas (discussed below). In addition to \$56 million in venture capital financing and \$75 million in stock buy-outs (see footnote 27), Yelp’s main revenue stream derives from corporate and small business advertising. In the former, Yelp displays ads for corporate national chains on the website (e.g., sidebar and banner ads). Yelp’s sales team also offers small businesses with a presence on the site a monthly-rate advertising package in exchange for additional features and

listing visibility. Small business advertisers, for example, are given priority listing in searches and appear as a sponsored link on the Yelp pages of local competitors.

Yelp also earns a small percentage of revenue through its online Apparel Store which sells Yelp merchandise. In the past year the company has also rolled out new revenue streams through its OpenTable integration and Daily Deals program. In the former, Yelp has partnered with the online restaurant booking company OpenTable.com which allows users to make restaurant reservations directly through a local business's Yelp listing ("Yelp and OpenTable," 2010); in return, Yelp earns a small percentage from OpenTable for every reservation booked through its site. In August 2010 Yelp rolled out its "Daily Deal" program which requires an advanced purchase of deeply discounted limited-time offers similar to websites like Living Social and Groupon. Yelp's first offer – a \$110 massage for \$49 at a local San Francisco massage parlor – sold over 1,600 in a single day, more than the combined sales and revenue that Groupon's *three* daily offers made that same day (Vacanti, 2010). Additional forms of revenue are also derived from third-party sites that integrate Yelp reviews into their own applications or services. For example, partnerships with companies like ZipRealty.com (a national online full-service residential real estate brokerage) and MeetingWave.com (an online professional and social meeting invitation service) integrate Yelp business listings, ratings and reviews for users to access while looking for new homes or deciding at what restaurant one might hold a meeting. At the time of writing, financial figures or percentages on these various revenue streams were unavailable.

Finally, revenue may also be derived from the sale of aggregate user information or customer databases to third parties collected through cookies, user profiles or other forms of dataveillance (Andrejevic, 2007; Fernback, 2007). While this sort of information is commonly

collected and sold to marketers for the means of targeted advertising, actual financial figures on the commodification of user data was not available at the time of writing in 2011.

Yelp's advertising model has been met with significant criticism in recent years as a number of lawsuits accusing the company of extortion have threatened to compromise the site's credibility.²⁸ At the time of writing, the site faced at least three class-action lawsuits representing over a dozen small businesses that claim Yelp manipulates reviews for companies by engaging in "pay to play" practices. The companies suing Yelp allege that Yelp's sales team promises to shift negative reviews down and move positive ones up on their individual listing if they purchase advertising with the site. Plaintiffs complain that negative reviews suddenly appeared after they refused or cancelled advertising packages, or that positive reviews from loyal customers were either buried at the bottom of the business's reviews or altogether disappeared (Richards, 2009; Wholson, 2011). Yelp has denied these claims stating that business owners merely "do not understand" how Yelp works. Until 2010, for instance, advertisers could pay to move a "favorite review" to the top of their search results so that it appeared as the first review listed when users searched for the business on Yelp. Yelp attributes confusion over how this feature worked on the part of business owners as the source of the problem, and has since removed this option from the advertising package.

A number of other local businesses have also tried to sue Yelp for libel and slander after receiving negative reviews, but the company has been protected from these suits under "anti-SLAPP" laws (strategic lawsuit against public participation) which "protect defendants against defamation lawsuits that are brought to punish, deter or silence public debate on topics of public interest" (Enos, 2011, para 5; see also Wholson, 2011). In its last dismissal in November 2010, a

²⁸ Self-identifying the social network that runs Yelp as the "PayPal Mafia" is particularly ironic given that Yelp is being sued for violation of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), which has typically been used to indict mobsters for extortion (Poletti, 2010).

dentist in San Francisco sued both Yelp and a local couple after the couple wrote a negative Yelp review that criticized the dentist for her failure to inform them about the use of dental amalgams containing mercury on their child. The California appellate court dismissed the case, forcing the dentist to pay the couple and Yelp \$80,000, ruling that the Yelp review “furthered discussion on issues of public interest” because it concerned the controversy surrounding mercury in dental fillings (Davis, 2011, para 5).²⁹ To date, all lawsuits against Yelp have been dismissed under anti-SLAPP or the Communications Decency Act which excludes websites from being held accountable for libelous or harmful content produced by users.

However, with 17 million reviews and 50 million unique monthly visitors by 2011, Yelp remains one of the most popular consumer-review sites on the web (Yelp Official Blog, 2011). While Yelp’s success may hinge on the fact that it fulfilled a niche in the local market, its ties to the “Pay Pal Mafia,” a social network responsible for some of today’s largest disruptive technologies, should not be understated. Not only has this relationship given Yelp direct access to advisors, a board of directors and – most importantly – *funding*, it also holds a degree of technological, social and cultural capital that competing start-ups do not possess. Yelp has thus broken into the local listings market not only with a distinct advantage over other start-ups, but with an established board of directors commercially oriented towards capitalizing on the “next big thing.”

Yelp Elite

As an incentive for promoting participation, Yelp offers “Elite Squad” membership to its most frequent reviewers who disclose enough personal profile information about themselves and maintain a regular site presence to constitute “Yelp Elite” status. “Presence” is subjectively

²⁹ Unlike libel and slander lawsuits, anti-SLAPP laws can require plaintiffs who lose their case to pay the defendant’s legal fees.

determined by the local Community Manager but theoretically based on the quantity and quality of Yelp reviews, Talk threads and/or comments received by other Yelpers. Yelp Elites are then invited to exclusive events and parties each month organized by the local Community Manager; they are also frequently invited to local business “soft openings” (i.e., pre-“grand” openings) to sample food or product offerings before anyone else in the city (including professional critics). Typically, however, “Official Yelp Elite” events (OYE’s) are organized by the local Community Manager as large soirees in which a number of local businesses and services come together to cross-promote their goods, as well.³⁰ Photo streams of Elite parties are uploaded to the Yelp Flickr page, posted to the Yelp Community Blog and are then reviewed by Elite attendees (and their “+1s”) under a designated “Official Yelp Elite Events” category.³¹

While Yelp is constantly expanding its Elite Squad to new cities, by 2011 the company only served 66 major metropolitan areas across the nine countries where the site exists. However, Yelp members that do not live in communities with an Official Yelp Elite Squad can still be “Elited” and participate in events at nearby cities. Elites are marketed as Yelp’s most “passionate” users; recognizable by a virtual “badge,” Yelp Elite members generally serve as brand advocates for the website. They also bridge their online social presence with unofficial meet-ups and events (“UYEs”), fostering a sense of “community” online and off.³²

³⁰ These goods are not limited to food and drinks but spa services (e.g., massages, facials, haircuts), party services (e.g., dunk tanks, lawn games), boat cruises, photo booths, karaoke services, etc. Additionally, OYEs are also frequently sponsored by nationally-distributed brands like Skyy Vodka, Firefly, Patron, Absolut, Jameson, Maker’s Mark, vitaminwater, Grolsch, Peroni, Blue Moon, Miller High Life and Ghirardelli chocolate, to name just a few.

³¹ It is important to note that Yelp instituted a separate “Yelp Elite Events” review category after the Federal Trade Commission ruled that anyone receiving free goods or services must disclose this in their reviews or blogs.

³² UYEs are not sanctioned or formally organized by Yelp or the local Community Manager but by Yelp members themselves, who utilize the Yelp infrastructure to organize and promote these offline events. Unlike most OYEs they are also typically open to all users, not just Yelp Elite.

Chapter Summaries

Fundamentally, this project is focused on how *online* modes of prosumption can be harnessed as a form of consumer-citizenship that engages community members on a local level. However, by combining analyses of structures (e.g., promotional discourse, architecture), texts (e.g., consumer reviews), uses and practices (e.g., consumer-reviewing as prosumption) obtaining insight into these various levels requires more than a single “theory” or methodological framework. Chapter Two, then, outlines the theoretical and methodological approaches that inform this study; it begins by outlining the existing literature on prosumption from a variety of empirical and theoretical perspectives, highlighting the tendency of Internet research to determine prosumption as *either* wholly empowering *or* wholly exploitative. The limitations of this approach are addressed in order to set up this research as a project that attempts to both account for *and* negotiate these poles by looking at the “in-between.” This chapter then reviews the literature on consumer-citizenship as another interdisciplinary concept that has predominantly been addressed by the fields of political science, history, economics and consumer studies much more so than media and communication studies. By briefly reviewing the history of this concept and its theoretical application to media technologies I aim to connect the political possibilities of prosumption (as a concept that bridges the traditionally separate realms of production and consumption) to consumer-citizenship (a concept that bridges the traditionally separate realms of “private” consumption and “public” citizenship).

As inferred by the study’s design and the literature reviewed, Chapter Two also explains the theoretical approach this dissertation takes in its attempt to both account for both structural considerations and user agency, as well as the tensions that emerge between them. This chapter then addresses the project’s methodological orientation, and provides theoretical, empirical and

practical explanations for how and why I selected and combined the methods of critical discourse and qualitative content analyses.

Chapter Three argues that prosumption is not “inherently” empowering just because it is consumer-driven. By demonstrating that the functions of prosumer-driven websites (i.e., those that rely on consumer-generated content) are not ideologically neutral, this section demonstrates how site structure, business model, privacy agreements, and other factors both enable and delimit various levels of user agency and power. Since this project is in some part exploratory, it begins with an analysis of how local listing sites like Yelp function as a form of prosumption. Then, through a critical discourse analysis, I compare Yelp’s promotional discourse with the structural affordances and constraints of the site’s architectural design. The purpose of Chapter Three is two-fold; one, it demonstrates how Yelp discursively constructs itself as a site of prosumption by employing a pro-consumer, cyber-libertarian rhetoric of “empowerment” that suggests a space for consumer-citizenship to emerge; and two, it demonstrates how these promises of consumer/user empowerment (and thus consumer-citizenship) are compromised by the site’s architectural design. While Yelp does privilege the rights of consumers in many aspects, the chapter also points to the myriad ways the site has increasingly opened itself to the interests of business that not only creates asymmetrical relations of power (Andrejevic, 2007) but intensifies the site’s consumerist orientation. In doing so, the site shapes participation (i.e., prosumption) towards the ends of *consumption* over *consumer-citizenship* by systematically eliminating avenues that might be utilized towards actively civic or political ends.

Picking up on the conclusions drawn in Chapter Three, Chapter Four provides an analysis of Yelp’s consumer-generated content that examines how users writing for the site engage or resist the structural affordances and limitations of the site’s architecture and design. Specifically,

a discourse analysis of consumer reviews describes and evaluates the way users negotiate Yelp's ideological bias to reinforce or transcend the site's consumerist or "hedonic" orientation (Khan, Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2005). Through an application of Jubas's (2007) definition of consumer-citizenship and Micheletti's (2003) concept of political consumerism, an analysis of reviews investigates the extent to which Yelp users appropriate the review space to engage in the politics of consumption, as well as how reviewers write "the local" into their reviewing. Drawing from Cohen's (2001) constructs of *customer-consumer* and *citizen-consumer*, this chapter demonstrates that two "types" of consumer-citizenship are present on Yelp in which the former is not only more prevalent but reinforces the site's "consumption bias." Additionally, the prevalence of consumers acting as "customers" rather than "citizens" contributes to a discursive construction of the "local" that situates localism within the "logic of the brand" (Arvidsson, 2007). The implications for this logic are discussed in the context of the site's restriction of consumer-citizenship to a form of "empowered consumption" grounded in a *lifestyle politics* (Bennett, 2004) consistent with the ideologies of neoliberal consumer capitalism. In this sense, Yelp is favorable to neoliberal discourses of consumer capitalism in which consumption serves as a stand-in for citizenship.

Addressing the limitations of research that focuses strictly on structures or texts, this dissertation turns toward a user study with Chapter Five in the attempt to understand how *prosumers* themselves perceive consumer-reviewing as a form of agency and empowerment. Interviews with "Yelpers" present a number of challenges to, and implications for, conclusions drawn about the [dis]empowering nature of prosumption and consumer-citizenship up to this point due to the dissertation's largely critical framework. Thus, by incorporating a user perspective, Chapter Five also aims to triangulate some of the critiques laid out in Chapters

Three and Four by accounting for opinions, attitudes, behaviors and other limitations or activities that were not directly observable due to the coding and analytical techniques previously employed.

The questions of concern Chapter Five, however, get beyond motivations in order to better understand the processes, experiences and the myriad ways in which people adopt and integrate the act of prosumption into their everyday lives (Humphreys, 2007). What I argue is that the potential for consumer-citizenship in many ways is contingent on the various *offline* experiences that “Yelping” mediates, which varies considerably from user to user. While this chapter to some degree confirms the hedonistic appeal of consumer-reviewing, interviews also suggest that this hedonism births an empowerment for the *creative* and *social* potential that Yelp affords users. On the other hand, Yelp’s *political* potential for consumer-citizenship is somewhat limited in the context of the site’s general attitude that Yelp “is not the place” for politics. However, acts and expressions of consumer-citizenship may on occasion occur, particularly in its promotion of localism (e.g., “buy local,” preservation of local “culture”). Generally though, these expressions appear in conjunction with other conditions of use; similarly, the impact Yelp has on the way one navigates through space, in negotiating power with local business owners or its role in shaping consumption practices, are similarly relayed as unintended consequences of the site’s larger social functions. In most cases, Yelp users view the act of consumer-reviewing as a creative outlet, or a tool for the individualistic expression of *lifestyle politics* in which a politics of [local] consumption becomes relevant only in the context of personal and social experiences.

Concluding this project in Chapter Six, I synthesize the three ways in which I have analyzed consumer-reviewing as a form of prosumption, its potential for consumer-citizenship and the ways in which this activity mediates or alters relationships to the local. Chapter Six also

offers an analysis of how “Yelping” can be understood as both a form of empowerment *and* exploitation, suggesting that the lived experiences of those who “do” the work of Yelping more realistically exist somewhere in between these binaries. This concluding chapter identifies four central areas or components that have emerged from this project and makes suggestions for future research on the hybrid and multifarious nature of engagement with social media generally, and consumer reviewing specifically.

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Chapter Two

Theorizing Prosumption and Consumer-Citizenship in the Cybernetic Space:

A Review of the Literature and Methodological Orientation

As a relatively new phenomenon, web-based local listing sites are an under-researched topic in critical-cultural theory and media studies. Their emergence over just the past few years has gained much ground in marketing and business literature, but has gone relatively unnoticed in the communications discipline. Commonly, consumer reviewing is instead grouped within the larger framework of “user-generated content,” of which the body of literature is vast. Scholars have referred to active media users who produce their own online content as “prosumers” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010); consumers of “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006); “co-creators” or “co-producers” (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008), “productive players” (Humphreys, 2009); “produsers” (Bruns, 2008); “craft consumers” (Campbell, 2005) and “informational gift-giv[ers]” (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007). These various articulations of the relatively same phenomena are connected by the fact that consumption in the realm of digital media technologies is an increasingly *productive* activity which blurs the lines between traditional forms of production and consumption. In other words, to engage in participatory web cultures like local listing sites requires consumers (as media users) to actively “produce” content, results, meanings, tangible media texts or intangible social relations that aid in, and add value to, life experiences and consumption processes.

In effect, consumer interactions through participatory web cultures are transforming consumer practices and consumer culture (Beer & Burrows, 2010). Arguably, this transformation is more direct and explicit on local listing sites than other forms of user-generated content being that the commodity “produced” is a discourse on, about, and through the act of consumption

itself. For this reason I intentionally employ the concept “consumer-generated content” since it more adequately describes the relationship to consumption that Yelp promotes. Those who produce content for Yelp produce content specifically around a discourse shaped by their activities and experiences as consumers – that is, documented acts of eating, shopping, clubbing, primping, paying taxes, purchasing a driver’s license, going to the dentist and other activities that in most instances require a monetary transaction of some sort. It makes sense, therefore, to reference content production as “consumer-generated” as it applies to participatory local listing sites like Yelp.³³

Review of the Literature

Consumer-Generated Content as Prosumption

The origins of *web-based* consumer-generated content³⁴ emerged alongside and out of the rise of so-called “Web 2.0.” Participatory media formats like blogs, wikis, mash-ups, multi-player video games, video hosting and social network sites all developed out of the interactive and open “architecture of participation” characteristic of social software technologies that allow users to create, remix and redistribute content traditionally owned and controlled by corporate organizations and the established culture industries (O’Reilly, 2005). Some scholars have observed these technological changes as part of a “paradigm shift” (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Bruns, 2008; Toffler, 1970, 1980), where the interactive and participatory features of Web 2.0 and social software have moved production from a “mass media” model towards a global “new

³³ Additionally, this research will generally refer to consumer-generated content on local listing sites as “prosumption,” although the terms “productive consumption” and “participatory consumption” may at times be used interchangeably.

³⁴ I intentionally separate “web-based” forms of user-generated content in this statement given that media consumers have long “produced” content through call-in programming, public access television, or participatory formats like *America’s Funniest Videos* and game shows. Discussion of “consumer-generated content” from this point forward refers to web-based production, unless otherwise noted.

media of mass conversation” (Spurgeon, 2008).³⁵ Central to this shift is the ability for web users to interact, collaborate and create content in a way that bypasses the traditional top-down, one-way transmission model of modern industrial modes of production. In other words, the technosocial environment offered by Web 2.0 and the myriad of open-source and free publishing tools has enfranchised those shut out by a corporate media system as media consumers increasingly become the *producers* of their own consumption experiences (Leung, 2009).

Toffler (1980) identified technology’s role in blurring the lines between “producers” and “consumers” as early as the 1980s with his theory of the “prosumer.” For Toffler, this shift was marked by a post-industrial “third wave” which retro-actively restored the economic formation representative of pre-industrial society (the “first wave”) that industrialization (the “second wave”) had destroyed with its separation of producers and consumers into separate functions and identities. For Toffler, this “third wave” has ushered in an era where tasks once administered by paid “producers” are offloaded onto consumers (e.g., pumping one’s own gas, filling one’s own beverage at fast food restaurants, self-administering pregnancy tests, scanning one’s own groceries). New media scholars have since expanded Toffler’s theory of prosumption to explain the emerging Internet economy of consumer-generated content production (e.g., Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Tapscott and Williams conceptualize prosumption as a co-creative process in which a “Wikinomics” model based on the collaborative work of prosumers has systematically replaced traditional economic and business models. In an extension of this concept, Bruns (2008) coined the term “produser” to explain how the once separate

³⁵ It is important to distinguish between interactivity and participation as it applies to the technological and technosocial affordances of new media. On the one hand, interactivity is engineered directly into the technology itself; thus, the more interactive a platform is, “the more flexibility and variation in the types of communication and exchange it can support” (Spurgeon, 2008, p. 4). Participation, on the other hand, is differentiated as the “practices and protocols of communications in living cultures” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 7). Meaning, participation is the activity of negotiating the interactive terrain of networks; it is an activity of human involvement and decision-making, or “the will to communicate in cultural and social contexts.”

identities of “producer,” “consumer,” and “user” no longer appropriately describe production and consumption processes and practices in the new media environment.³⁶ In this new model, produsage and prosumption are iterative and non-linear practices; new media users are simultaneously producers and consumers in the act of creating, re-mixing and/or re-distributing media texts, content, information and knowledge in participatory web cultures. Prosumption has thus come to encompass the way much of business is done in the online economy, where the realm of information production is simultaneously produced and consumed by users, producers and consumers in a de-centralized, bottom-up model of participation. It encompasses a number of productive activities found across open-source communities, social networks, blogs, local listing sites and other forms of online publishing, and holds the potential to facilitate multi-directional information sharing on a global and local level. In an online environment where nearly anyone with a computer and Internet access can participate, such platforms are celebrated for enabling new media users to harness the collective power of global networks to create new kinds of content, dialogues, and communities.

Prosumption as Empowerment

Considerable tensions have arisen between scholars who regard prosumption and other participatory modes of consumption as necessarily *empowering* and subversive, and those who view prosumption as largely *exploitative*. On one end, techno-utopians and cyber-libertarians argue that user-generated content empowers consumers whose choices have long been constrained by a hierarchical corporate media culture. Underscored by *Time Magazine*’s decision to name “You” the 2006 “Person of the Year,” this perspective views the interactive, mobile

³⁶ Unlike a physical product, produsage does not have an end point; there is no “finished” or “final” project within the new media sphere. Rather, produsage is based on the continuous recycling and remixing of existing media content, information and knowledge.

affordances of Web 2.0 and digital technologies as offering a degree of unprecedented user control marked by bottom-up, de-centralized power structures (Anderson, 2009; Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2003). For instance, in *The Wealth of Networks*, Benkler popularly observed empowerment as originating through the “radically decentralizing” technical and economic characteristics of networked digital technologies. Specifically, Benkler points to the way the technological affordance of “interactivity” in digital technologies enables citizens to challenge authoritative knowledge and corporate power structures through the production and distribution of user-produced content, cultural texts, experiences, ideas and knowledge.

From this techno-utopian (or “cyber-libertarian,” “cyber-celebrant”) perspective, prosumption is not only a form of leisure entertainment but an empowering activity, as well. For Benkler (2006), information networks empower users by improving “the practical capacities of individuals” (p. 8).³⁷ From this standpoint, the networked information economy increases personal efficiency and autonomy, access to the democratic public sphere, social justice and human development and a critical, self-reflective culture. For example, not only can individuals do more for and by themselves, the networked information economy also enables new media users to act outside the traditional constraints of social and economic hierarchies, price systems and the market sphere. As it applies to consumer reviewing, prosumption theoretically enhances autonomy by allowing individuals to express themselves more creatively or to create their own expressions in loose affiliation with others (Benkler). According to Benkler, individuals are also “less susceptible to manipulation by a legally defined class of others,” thus empowering new media users with alternative platforms for communication that moderate the power of traditional mass media (p. 9). Additionally, the expansion of these platforms increases venues and

³⁷ While he is not referring to prosumption specifically, his work refers to the practices and outcomes that nonetheless emerge from the productive activity that occurs on and through networked participatory web cultures.

opportunities for information access, breaking down the traditional knowledge-power hierarchy and making space for an increasingly critical, self-reflective culture; as prosumption allows cultural production to become more malleable and transparent, new folk cultures emerge and the potential for closer social ties also increases.

Prosumption, therefore, has impacted numerous sectors within industrial capitalism, particularly in the way by which information is produced, distributed and consumed (Bruns, 2008). Perhaps most significantly, power has begun to shift away from paid “professionals” and established industries to amateur computer users, hobbyists and knowledgeable consumers (Anderson, 2008, 2009; Bruns; Jenkins, 2006; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Participatory media formats like blogging and “citizen journalism,” for instance, have presented problems for the traditional print newspaper industry as everyday people become street-level reporters in real-time, uploading eyewitness videos, commenting on stories produced by others, or by merely aggregating news from other online sources. Musicians can circumvent record companies to become international pop stars with viral videos or free distribution tools offered by social network sites (e.g., Justin Bieber, Greyson Chance). Alas, consumer reviewing on sites that enable user feedback, such as Amazon.com, IMDB or Yelp, theoretically impact the flow of commerce to certain products, establishments and brands. Wherein industrial modes of production offered consumers few opportunities to be “active communicators,” the interactive affordances of networked social media have *empowered* consumers-as-producers by granting them agency to navigate, challenge and circumvent existing boundaries and structures. For cyber-celebrants like Jenkins, the media consumer as producer has successfully waged so much productive power that the traditional media/culture industries are in disarray over how to maintain and regain their legacy of power and control. As Jenkins noted, these industries are

“increasingly dependent on active and committed consumers to spread the word about valued properties in an overcrowded media marketplace,” yet at the same time, these industries “*are terrified of what happens if this consumer power gets out of control*” (p. 138, emphasis added). Prosumers in the digital era are thus now theoretically empowered by the capacity to actively produce and consume their own opinions and discourses rather than relying on the traditional top-down disseminated networks of the pre-Web 2.0 past.

Prosumption as Exploitation

On the other end of the theoretical spectrum, critical scholars have pointed to the anti-democratic, exploitative tendencies of prosumption (e.g., Andrejevic, 2007; Cohen, 2008; van Dijck, 2009). From this perspective, the “architecture of participation” celebrated by technoutopianists is theorized as a way for capitalism to harness and commodify the work of prosumers to be used in their own exploitation. Much research has demonstrated how the personal information and expression of tastes that new media users voluntarily upload to social network sites like Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace can actually serve as “virtual focus groups” for marketers (Andrejevic; Cohen).³⁸ Other research points to the institutional exploitation of social media as a form of surveillance and social control to create what are ultimately “asymmetrical relations of power” that disproportionately favor big businesses through the commodification of user data (Andrejevic; Arvidsson, 2006). For example, when prosumers talk about or review their consumption experiences online, they are effectively “co-creating value” through social communication with others. The value produced through these active and voluntary consumer

³⁸ Prosumers “produce” two types of content or products; one, they produce the content generated through their creative or productive activity (i.e., consumer reviews, videos, pictures, conversation). They also produce their own stream of user behavior, online activity and personal information collected by third parties through dataveillance. In defining prosumption I refer to the first type of content, but the second form is always implicit to discussions of *implications*.

activities are channeled back to companies as “raw material for the firm’s commodity production” (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008, p. 177). In this sense, productive talk becomes a form of unpaid surplus labor that “does not necessarily contribute to the consumer’s ability to buy more goods” (p. 177), thereby rendering co-creation as a form of exploitation. In other words, the social cooperation produced through “talk” is, in effect, a form of unpaid labor; as such, this activity is actually collapsed into the production process rather than consumption, offering consumers little more than an *illusion* of freedom, agency and empowerment.

Writing from a critical perspective, Andrejevic (2007) critiques the techno-utopian ideal of consumer-generated content as a subversive challenge to the economic, political, social and cultural hierarchies of mass society and he positions prosumption as a form of anti-politics used to legitimize the rationalization of political economic control. To make this point he challenges the very notion of *interactivity*, which scholars like Benkler (2006) view as a central affordance of networked technologies. For Andrejevic, interactivity is not a revolutionary technological development so much as it is a rationalized form of monitoring and surveillance that creates a “digital enclosure” where all interactions and transactions can be turned into and sold back as cybernetic commodities. Thus, the relations of power between for-profit website owners and the unpaid content producers (i.e., prosumers) are, in fact, highly “asymmetrical.” From this perspective, prosumption is *not* a form of power-sharing as techno-utopians suggest, but rather a new means of exploitation under the guise of freedom and control. As user activity in the interactive realm is mined, collected, and aggregated into centralized databases by private companies, this information is sold to third parties without compensation to those who produce or generate this content. Once employed by third-parties (e.g., business owners, marketing firms, government agencies), these databases effectively “manufacture customers as commodities”

(Zwick & Knott, 2009) that create highly detailed consumer profiles through the aggregation of online habits, search histories, purchases, memberships, credit histories and even places traveled as determined by geolocational data tracking.³⁹ In essence, the commodification of prosumer content and personal information effectively and efficiently re-packages and re-sells consumers *back* to themselves. Often disguised as “mass customization,” target marketing thus becomes a way for capitalism to extract the surplus labor of audiences (and thus surplus value) under the *guise* of user/consumer empowerment.

Prosumer Capitalism

Scholars have only recently begun to theorize the role of prosumption in transforming the structure of contemporary capitalism. As mentioned previously, while the concept of prosumption has been around for some time, its digital manifestations are comparatively distinct from its “offline” material predecessors first identified by Toffler (1980). Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) in particular argue that a key distinction between Toffler’s prosumer theory and new forms of web-based prosumption is that the latter are far more difficult for capitalists to control. In a special issue dedicated to prosumption in the March 2010 issue of *Journal of Consumer Culture*, the contributors theorized the potential for digital prosumption to transform contemporary *consumer capitalism* into an era of *prosumer capitalism*. Ritzer and Jurgenson specifically point to the shifting relationship between capitalists and prosumers as facilitating this transformation in a number of ways. For one, the discourses and practices created by new, web-based prosumption gives capitalists *less control* over prosumers than Toffler (1980) originally articulated. This loss of control comes at a time where traditional formal organizations in the United States that have long “resisted” capitalist control are being systematically dismantled

³⁹ New media users, of course, cannot access this data about themselves, which when sold becomes the private property of its new third-party owner.

(e.g., labor unions, organized consumer movements); since there no longer exists a *formal* network to oppose the structural inequalities of a capitalist system, Ritzer and Jurgenson suggest that web-based prosumption – however disorganized and fractured – fills this void. Specifically, prosumption enables powerless people to reclaim some degree of [lost] control. Two, they argue that while web-based prosumption (e.g., consumer-produced content) may be understood as a form of unpaid labor, such practices are not exploitive because prosumers enjoy – if not *love* and take pride in – these activities.⁴⁰ Three, Ritzer and Jurgenson argue that an entirely new economic form is emerging from prosumption, especially on the Internet, where in most cases no money exchanges hands between users and website owners. If a capitalist system involves profit-based monetary exchange, then how do we make sense of prosumption’s “economy of *free*” (Anderson, 2009)? Site owners, they note, do not want to pay prosumers for their work while prosumers themselves do not want to pay to use these services, either.⁴¹ In conjunction with the shift from scarcity to an economy of *abundance*, Ritzer and Jurgenson see the power of prosumption as holding the capacity to transform contemporary capitalism. Capitalism, they argue, must *adapt* to prosumption; this adaptation is significant because it exemplifies a historical moment in which capitalism has been “forced” to acknowledge and *respond* to this bottom-up resistance (notwithstanding the point that most prosumers might not *recognize* their actions as “resistance”). The fact that many prosumers openly express and resist the terms of “unpaid labor” through culture jamming or hacktivism in instances where web companies try to control the terms or means of production further suggests the possibilities for a new “prosumer

⁴⁰ Ritzer and Jurgenson note here that the exploitation of producers has been historically defined by low wages or Marx’s concept of surplus labor. They also point out, however, that consumers have also to some extent been “exploited;” for example, consumer exploitation occurs when buyers “overpay” businesses for a particular product to the point of “unreasonable profits.”

⁴¹ Furthering this point is the fact that many prosumers do not want to pay for content at all, including information and cultural goods such as music and movies.

capitalism” to emerge from digital prosumer labor. Thus, whether or not prosumers realize their practice to be ideologically-based and thus political, or if they merely enter the terms of unpaid labor for “mundane and prosaic reasons,” Ritzer and Jurgenson see prosumption as potentially effecting a fundamentally transformative change in the contemporary political economy.⁴²

Empirical Research: User Studies

As evidenced by the diverse theoretical approaches taken in the literature on consumer-generated content, the social, culture, political and economic implications for prosumption remain largely theoretical. Presently, empirical research on consumer-generated content and prosumption are comparatively under-researched, particularly in respect to user studies (Leung, 2009). What is it about the act of creating content that draws so many people to it? Who *are* prosumers and how do they perceive and experience the complex relations of power, control and exploitation? What motivates them to produce content, certain *types* of content, and how do these activities come to have meaning within their everyday lives?

For all of the theoretical work that both lauds and criticizes the power of new media technologies and Web 2.0 to empower users, comparatively fewer studies exist from the user perspective. Where much of this work has been done, studies tend to rely on quantitative methods of data collection, particularly surveys based on pre-determined responses from which users can choose from a range of described online habits. Further, many of these studies also rely on convenience samples which limit richness and generalizability. A survey of the research on user-generated content also points out that contemporary media users tend to participate in different web cultures for different reasons (Leung, 2009). Unfortunately, much of the empirical

⁴² Hesmondhalgh (2007) offers a less drastic version of this argument to suggest in his work on the culture industries that consumer-generated content (i.e., prosumption) is perhaps not necessarily a viable *threat* to the culture industries so much as it is a *disturbance*. The latter, of course, suggests that this type of collaborative content creation can be managed; it does not suggest a radical transformation of the contemporary political economy.

work on user-generated content seems to either ignore this point or fails to acknowledge that findings about prosumption in one format might not be generalizable to prosumption in another (e.g., bloggers are not motivated by the same needs as the participation in social media or consumer review sites, for example).⁴³ This assumption is not limited solely to quantitative or empirical research, either. Critical, cultural or more macro-level theoretical perspectives have a tendency to lump all user-generated content together as a singular phenomenon, as well (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Andrejevic, 2007; Bruns, 2008).⁴⁴

However, existing empirical research does suggest that many people produce web content as a means of satisfying social needs such as self-expression, status-seeking and social interaction (e.g., boyd, 2007; Ellison & boyd, 2007; Kalmus et al., 2009; Lampel & Bhalla, 2007). A quantitative study by Leung (2009) breaks down the motivations for producing various

⁴³ The differentiation of user-generated content is not well articulated across the literature (e.g., boyd, 2007; Kim & Yun, 2008). For example, blogger motivations tend to be correlated with the need to share information, professional advancement, documenting one's life, providing advice, commentary and opinions *as well as* a space for self-expression and other social purposes (Nardi, Schiano, Grumbecht & Swartz, 2004; Trammell, Tarkowski & Hofmohl, 2004, cited in Leung, 2009). Social network sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace), on the other hand, meet more social needs that allow users to articulate and display personal social networks (Papacharissi, 2002; boyd, 2007) and as a means of self-expression and self-presentation (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Kim & Yun). Thus, the motivations for creating blog content versus the motivations for producing content on social network sites may be distinct in their functional, cognitive and practical motivations but similar in their social and recognition needs.

⁴⁴ While a study of user motivations lies outside the scope of this project, it is important to remember as already noted that the motives, reasons and processes for producing online content differs across and between contexts, content type, site structure and technological affordances of each site (among other variables) (boyd, 2007; Kim & Yun, 2008; Kalmus et al., 2009; Leung, 2009). Therefore, motivations, processes and experiences are specific to prosumption type and differ across web cultures. For instance, boyd's (2006, 2007) extensive digital ethnographies of social network sites have shown that young people tend to experience these sites as social venues for "hanging out" with friends, maintaining existing relationships with peers, writing community into being, and a means of identity formation and performance. Even research on *mobile* social networking systems offer users a somewhat different experience or set of social practices that include strengthening, modifying and rearranging how public spaces – as well as social connections – are experienced (Humphreys, 2007). It is quite possible, then, that participation in local listing sites is experienced differently than participation in social networks or writing consumer reviews for sites that attract a global audience. Further, the heavy focus on psychological motivations and the quantification of variance in user behavior lacks what I perceive to be the more interesting questions about user processes, perceptions and social practices: what do consumers get out of sharing their consumption experiences with others? How do they go about their participation? Do users perceive these activities as empowering? What does it mean for everyday consumers to produce and distribute content, allowing their opinions and stories to be heard and adhered to by others? These types of questions emerge from gaps in the literature but also infer that the motives, processes and experiences of participatory consumption are much less monolithic than understood at the time of writing.

forms of web content into four categories that are inextricably tied to these needs: 1) *Recognition needs* (e.g., establishing personal identity, building confidence, self-promotion); 2) *Cognitive needs* (e.g., broadening knowledge, self-education, to learn); 3) *Social needs* (e.g., self-expression, self-presentation, maintaining personal relationships); 4) *Entertainment needs* (e.g., passing time, amusement).⁴⁵

Leung's (2009) study suggests, therefore, that social motivations may be central to the reasons why people participate on consumer review sites like Yelp (O'Connor, 2008). While consumer reviews have been studied as a form of "informational gift-giving" across more globally-oriented sites like Amazon, TripAdvisor and IMDB (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007), it is not clear how this activity unfolds within a strictly *local* context. Marketing studies on consumer review sites have found that this activity meets social needs – e.g., self-expression, status seeking and the desire for social interaction with like-minded consumers (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004; O'Connor; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). While the popular belief is that consumers share information on review sites as a means of "ranting," exacting revenge or venting frustration with certain products or businesses, some research suggests that these negative motivations are in fact overstated (O'Connor). Instead, consumer-reviewers may also be motivated by altruistic purposes. For example, consumer reviewers self-report that they rate and write about their consumption experiences out of a desire to help people, a concern for others, to share positive and negatives experiences, and to solicit advice from other consumers, in the

⁴⁵ While Leung's (2009) study looks at five distinct activities (forums, blogs, Wikipedia, personal webpage and YouTube), these five activities are collapsed into a single measure of what he calls "user-generated *contents*." Yet interestingly, his measures for user motives were adopted from studies focused specifically on *blogger* motivations. Applying blogger motives to measure the motivations for producing content across other venues like forums, Wikipedia, or YouTube points to a central problem in the user-generated content literature – the precarious assumption that all presumption experiences are the same.

expectation of future reciprocation or as a way of “paying it forward” (Grewal, Cline & McKenna, 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al; Schmallegger & Carson).

Research suggests that giving the “gift” of information, therefore, is simultaneously a social, functional and altruistic action motivated by internal/personal (self) and external/social (others) factors. In this sense, prosumption on local listing sites may be exemplary of “consumer-citizenship,” whereby certain consumption practices are approached not as a purely hedonistic or impulsive but rather activities infused with public or civic qualities. Interestingly, many of the reasons prosumers are drawn to producing content also reflects theoretical findings about consumer-citizenship; studies on both tend to situate the prosumer and citizen-consumer within a larger socio-cultural milieu characterized by the “existential insecurities” of postmodernity. From this standpoint, consumption practices are the means by which people produce solidarities or “anchors” to reality in a social context that no longer provides such ways of identifying or uniting with others (Arvidsson, 2006). Reflecting back on Ritzer and Jurgenson’s discussion about the potential shift to prosumer capitalism similarly positions issues of resistance, identification and [loss of] power within this context. Consumer-citizenship, like prosumption, thus becomes a way for people to construct social relations, assimilation, identity, or a sense of group coherence in response to the postmodern condition of alienation, isolation, and displacement.

Consumer-Citizenship

Prosumption may be one way by which people come to understand citizenship in a post-industrial hyper-mediated environment. A characteristic of post-industrial society or Toffler’s (1980) “third wave” is not only the collapse of the traditional dichotomy of production and

consumption, but the public and private, as well. This is not only true for economic and cultural production, but also for political participation. As Scammell (2000, p. 352) notes:

It is no longer possible to cut the deck neatly between citizenship and civic duty, on one side, and consumption and self-interest, on the other. They are not at opposite ends of the spectrum... A model of citizenship, with some of the classical republican dimensions of civic duty, public-spiritedness, and self-education, is an increasingly apt description of consumer behavior.

However, the “citizen” and “consumer” have been long differentiated as subjectivities relegated to oppositional spheres of human activity – the citizen being concerned with the larger public interest in the political sphere, and the consumer as one concerned with “indulging individual wants in the economic sphere” (Cohen, 2001, p. 203). Similarly, production (producers) and consumption (consumers) have been also treated as antithetical practices and identities; as such, citizens and producers, consumers and consumerism have been respectively relegated to public and private spheres with little acknowledgment to the complexities and overlaps existing in either construct.⁴⁶ Some critics have also argued that consumer culture’s emphasis on acquisition, self-interest and individualism “at the expense of civic-mindedness” has effectively resulted in the decline of civil society (Shah, McLeod, Freidland & Nelson, 2007, p.7; see also Putnam, 2001).

Scholars of consumer culture have more recently acknowledged, however, that politics and consumption have never been wholly separate; rather, the public/private spheres and the citizen/consumer have instead been mutually entwined throughout the 20th Century (e.g., Cohen, 2001, 2003; Cross, 2002; Daunton & Hilton, 2001; Gabriel & Lang 2006). Critical feminist

⁴⁶ For this reason, the dichotomization of citizenship/consumerism and producer/consumer as public/private binaries has reinforced a long history of gendered binaries that have separated the unpaid labor of “householding” or “women’s work” from the “productive” work performed by men (Strasser, 2003).

scholarship has been one area in particular to challenge these binaries as false dichotomies; historical works from this perspective point to numerous instances throughout history where women have used their consumer role in the marketplace as a way of agitating for political rights and gender equity (e.g., see Jubas, 2007 for a review of this literature). Throughout history, other marginalized groups have also historically used their purchasing power as a form of resistance or leverage in the struggle for economic and civil rights (Cohen, 2001, 2003). Scholars have also looked at the “democratizing effects” of mass consumption as a means of bridging the citizen-consumer divide, particularly as the production of cheaper and accessible goods has enabled working and middle classes to at least symbolically participate in the lifestyles of elites and aristocrats (Jubas).

The notion of consumer-citizenship has thus been used to account for consumption practices that occur as a civic or political act, or as “an economic form of political behavior” (Shah et. al, 2007, p. 231). By definition, “political behavior” refers to expressions related to, or associated with, conventional notions of democratic citizenship (Jubas, 2007). But how exactly are consumption and democratic citizenship theoretically and discursively bound? What are the characteristics of democratic citizenship that can be said to be located in consumption activities and practices? Before proceeding further with discussions of consumer-citizenship as a positive form of politics or problematic stand-in for citizenship, it would be beneficial to first demonstrate how activities performed in the realm of consumption are theoretically aligned with a mainstream understanding of democratic citizenship. The following section offers an explication of the citizen-consumer ideal which ties fundamental aspects of democratic citizenship to consumption practices. This review is then followed by a summary of the literature that divides various research traditions on consumer-citizenship into two separate arenas, the

consumer-citizen/consumer-activist and the *empowered consumer*, which will be used throughout the remainder of this dissertation.

Consumption and the principles of democratic citizenship: An explication. In her review on the understandings and limitations of the citizen-consumer, Jubas (2007) outlines six elements of democratic citizenship as a means of explicating how the practice of consumption “has come to function as a signifier and an expression of citizenship” (p. 232). Borrowing five of the six elements of democratic citizenship from Faulks (2002), Jubas demonstrates how *rights*, *responsibilities*, *resources*, *recognition* and *residence* have been historically bound to consumption practices. Jubas’s justifies a sixth “R” – *resistance* – as an element of citizenship that has also been long tied to consumer politics. Each of these “six R’s” and their connection to the politics of consumption is outlined below.

Rights. In terms of rights, consumers have long used their purchasing power as a way of agitating for three types of rights – civil, social and political – which combined, make up the foundations of democratic citizenship. According to Jubas (2007, p. 241), consumer rights to safety, information and choice are not dissimilar from civil rights; rights to being heard and redress equate to political rights, while rights to education, a healthy environment and basic needs are akin to social rights. From this perspective, therefore, the rights of consumers frequently overlap (in both theory and practice) with the rights of citizens; for example, the rise of 19th century mass production for mass consumption contributed to democratizing *access* to goods previously reserved for the upper classes, thus providing individuals (especially women) with a means to symbolically articulate status and rights in the public sphere (e.g., social rights). The struggle for labor rights (e.g., civil and economic rights) and fair prices (e.g., economic rights) in the late 19th century onward has also discursively bridged the relationship between

citizens and consumers; here, workers were finally recognized as critical to the consumption of goods as “maximum work hours and minimum wages were seen as guarantees that individual workers could share in the promise of consumerism and realize their full rights as citizens” (p. 239). Additionally, the emergence of consumer rights organizations and reform groups throughout the 20th century lobbied for, and instituted, a number of federally-regulated “protections” that guaranteed consumers specific rights from the profit-driven motives of private industry (e.g., the exploitation of credit lenders, health and safety risks, dangerous or poorly made products).

Responsibilities. Theories of democratic citizenship also connect rights to *responsibilities* (e.g., “practices” or “duties”), which also manifest in the sphere of consumption, as well (Jubas, 2007). Just as citizens have certain responsibilities to the public sphere that must be fulfilled to insure the reproduction of a society’s democratic organization, consumers must accordingly fulfill a similar set of responsibilities in the private sphere. For example, credit lenders extend certain *rights* to consumers – in the way that democratic governments extend rights to citizens – and consumers are required to take some level of *responsibility* for these rights in return (e.g., paying those lenders back).⁴⁷ Both governments and creditors, Jubas notes, have developed “means of punishing” both citizens and consumers who fail to fulfill their responsibilities.

The concept of the “social contract” is also applicable here; the reproduction of democratic societies requires citizens to at times relinquish certain rights and desires for the benefit of the greater good; social contract theory in this sense parallels responsible consumption (e.g., in times of war, economic recessions). As Jubas (2007) notes, “careful consumption” has long been a primary responsibility for women, whose familial duties require thoughtful and responsible consumer choices. Similarly, boycotts and buycotts as a means of consumer activism

⁴⁷ Similarly, citizens must take responsibility for abiding by the rights extended by governments, as well.

have been taken up by consumers as a form of civic responsibility; for example, boycotts of imperial or slave-produced commodities or boycotting as a form of patriotic duty in times of war reinforce the ties between citizenship, consumption and responsibility.⁴⁸ Most recently, the demand for more ethical and environmentally-friendly forms of consumption (via fair trade or ecologically sustainable goods) suggests an “an even broader discourse of consumer responsibility” aimed at tying rights to responsibilities, consumers to producers, and individuals to one another (p. 242).

Resources. Popular discourse often conflates consumer capitalism with democratization, claiming that mass production for mass consumption has offered unprecedented opportunities to socially or economically marginalized groups who would otherwise not have access. While such claims may be partially true for the middle-classes, the struggle over basic needs and capital remains a prevalent and real issue for many people both locally and globally. National and global statistics that document the inequality of wealth reinforce this point; as Jubas (2007, p. 242) notes, “Consumerism makes no effort to distribute capital equitably and consumption continues to highlight struggles over resources” which in turn, illuminate a number of social inequalities demarked by race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, age, etc. The equitable distribution of *resources* is closely related to *rights*, and thus also explains the history of political agitation by labor unions for minimum wages, equal pay for equal work and the demand for price control. Contemporary struggles over resources are especially salient in the face of transnational corporate consolidation, globalization, and the increasing privatization of land rights, particularly in the agricultural industry (both home and abroad). Rights to resources are thus not only an issue for consumers but citizens, as well; thus, numerous consumer movements have emerged

⁴⁸ Responsible consumption during times of war is often understood as “responsible citizenship;” for example, limiting consumption of certain products (e.g., sugar) or “buying American” during World War II was considered a responsibility to the “greater good.”

aimed at helping small-scale producers reclaim or preserve public land and control over the production processes lost to the effects of trade liberalization and neoliberal consumer capitalism in recent decades. As Jubas notes, a majority of these movements have arisen out of the food and agricultural industry because “resources” are so closely tied with basic needs. In the case of resources, therefore, it is nearly impossible to draw a line between citizens and consumers, particularly in the associated trade movements (e.g., fair trade, direct trade), single-sourcing and other production-oriented concerns aimed at [re-]connecting consumers with producers.

Recognition. Recognition of political rights, identification and equality has been an essential component of citizenship which is now increasingly located in the sphere of consumption. While citizens were once recognized on the basis of their activity within the public sphere, such expressions are more commonly produced through articulations of the self in consumption and the realm of “cultural citizenship.” Through the acquisition of specific commodity signs, consumption becomes central to the process of one’s identity formation and maintenance which comes to represent how one desires to assert the self and be *recognized* as a [cultural] citizen. Mediated representations thus present appealing variations of the “good life” and the “good citizen” as consumable values.

While identity [re]construction through the assemblage of consumer goods and commodity signs is often criticized as a vapid and superficial means of self-actualization, this process and means of identification is also understood as a central feature (or product) of advanced capitalism. As traditional forms of community and identification have declined in the face of increasing alienation and estrangement (Andrejevic, 2007), political, social and cultural forms of recognition are [re]constructed via consumption practices (Bennett, 2004). Markets readily account for the impact of globalization and its porous borders by expanding cultural

products, styles and aesthetics that *recognize* hybrid cultural identities and the plurality of contemporary citizenship in the marketplace. For example, restaurants catering to “fusion” foods or “pan-Asian” styles of cookery suggest that the market has evolved to accommodate or *recognize* (if not discursive construct) hybrid cultural identities. Conversely, civic or cultural recognition is oftentimes exploited by marketers through the appropriation and commodification of “culturally desirable qualities” (Jubas, 2007, p. 246). To this point Jubas concludes (p. 246): “Ultimately and ironically, rather than eliminating social divisions and hierarchies based on gender, class and race, consumerism and consumption often reinforce them.” Normative debates aside, there is little denying that consumption plays a key role in the political, social and cultural recognition of contemporary citizenship and status.

Residence. Democratic citizenship has long been tied to issues of *residence* in that citizenship is territorially bound, usually with the nation-state but also to the local and for some, the global, as well. As relegated to the “private” sphere, consumption has been traditionally considered as separate from one’s “place of residence” (i.e., the home). However, Jubas (2007) notes the ways shopping has long played a civic, place-based role in local communities; for example, local consumerism played a significant role in shaping Victorian London’s urban and suburban landscape, while consumerism in late 19th and 20th century US and European cities prompted the implementation of local by-laws that restricted residential business locations as a way of “protecting” neighborhoods from health and safety problems (e.g., pollution, vermin, noise). In both cases, *residence* played a key role in influencing how citizens came to regard the separation of private and public forms of consumption (and often gender relations in the process).

Residence has also long encouraged citizen-consumers to support national economies during periods of war, or as a way of expressing loyalty through the purchase of locally-made goods. The contemporary “buy local” and “localvore” movements conflate local citizenship with consumer behavior in their goal of generating solidarity and support for locally produced and distributed goods, which in turn, keeps money in the community of residence. As Jubas (2007, p. 246) rightly notes, however, these movements often “clash with calls for new or affordable products and liberalized trade agreements.” Buying local (or nationally) in most areas of the world, for instance, often means higher prices than cheaper, mass-produced goods. Buying local also requires buying *seasonally* which means adjusting one’s lifestyle to deal with the restrictions in choice this practice requires; such changes, of course, often directly contradict the hegemonic ideologies of consumerism and neoliberal capitalism that celebrate the promise of “consumer choice” offered by the free market.

Similar to the element of *recognition*, residence is also a key factor in the construction of “citizen” and “consumer” identities. While trade agreements and porous borders have opened up a number of possibilities for transnational citizenship and identification, national affiliation still remains a central organizing principle around which other aspects of identity construction – gender, class, race – are also based. Therefore, residence remains a central element of democratic citizenship which, like *rights* and *recognition*, can be asserted through consumption practices.

Resistance. First Amendment rights to free speech, assembly, and the right to petition for the redress of grievances are all ways of conceptualizing *resistance* (i.e., “protest”) as a central element of democratic citizenship.⁴⁹ As previously discussed, “consumer rights” have been utilized as a way to advance citizenship rights of marginalized groups throughout history. Thus,

⁴⁹ Jubas (2007) does not elaborate on how the sixth “R” – resistance – that she adds to Faulks’ (2002) five “Rs” of citizenship is fundamentally tied to democratic citizenship. Instead, she jumps immediately into connecting resistance to consumer politics. I have attempted to expand the connection here.

Jubas (2007) contends that the most prominent form of contemporary *consumer* resistance in the US is the application of “counter-discourses” to mainstream consumer rhetoric that asserts the duty of citizens is “to consume in support of their national economies.” Counter-discourses also serve to “challenge rhetoric of the neutrality and inherent fairness of the free market” (Jubas, 2007, p. 248). Resistance also occurs in the form of ethical consumerism (e.g., “fair trade”) or other iterations that tie consumption practices with commitments to social justice, including resistance to corporate domination, poor labor conditions (e.g., the anti-sweatshop movement) and privatization (e.g., of natural resources and healthcare). Expressions of resistance and counter-discourses in contemporary consumer culture cut across public and private spheres in the form of public protest, boycotts, buycotts and, I would argue, *consumer reviewing*.

Types of consumer-citizenship: Parsing out the field. Since “consumption is a process in which all citizens participate” (Jubas, 2007, p. 235), the question is not so much if consumer-citizenship exists but what identifiable and effective form(s) it takes.⁵⁰ Explorations of consumer-citizenship have identified the politics of consumption in a number of specific social, cultural, historical, political and economic contexts; furthermore, the citizen-consumer has been identified and defined in myriad ways across a number of different theoretical and discursive frameworks. For example, consumption practices infused with varying degrees of civic virtue have been theorized as “critical consumption/consumerism” (Jubas, 2007; Sassatelli, 2007), “radical consumption” (Littler, 2009), “compassionate consumption” (Kuehn, 2009), “ethical consumption,” “political consumerism” (Micheletti, 2003, Micheletti & Stolle, 2007),

⁵⁰ Whether or not consumer-citizenship is an effective or true mode of citizenship are relevant, if not altogether different, arguments.

“empowered” or “entrepreneurial consumption” (Clarke, 2007; Ouellette & Hay, 2008).⁵¹ While these terms in many ways reflect a difference in research traditions, Daunton and Hilton (2001) also point out that these assorted terms reflect the nature of contemporary consumer politics as a practice that lacks a “unifying consumer consciousness or even a single definition of the “consumer interest”” (p. 2). In this sense, the multifarious approaches to consumer-citizenship are reflective of the politics of the contemporary global economy; if anything, Daunton and Hilton argue, the real strength of consumer politics is located in its very diversity.

In order to make sense of the vast literature on the politics of consumption I have broken down the myriad discursive formations of “consumer-citizenship” into what I believe are two distinct but related “types” or “arenas” (Trentmann, 2007) that account for a number of scholarly articulations of the consumer-citizen. These two variations encompass previous distinctions made by other scholars that together encompass what this project will refer to as “prosumer-citizenship,” or ways of approaching prosumption through the practice of consumer-citizenship. Separately, the activity or practice of prosumer-citizenship can be broken down into two “types” or “arenas:” prosumer-citizenship as *consumer-citizenship/consumer activism*, and prosumer-citizenship as *empowered consumption*. In the former, consumer-citizenship is constituted through a form of political consumerism (Micheletti, 2003) in which consumers, acting as citizens, mobilize around issues of social justice broadly conceived to include any number of ecological, political, economic, cultural, ethic, racial, gender, sexual identity, local, national or global endeavors with a progressive focus at redistributing power and equality. In the latter formation, prosumer-citizenship can be understood as a mode of neoliberal governance in which

⁵¹ Both Clarke and Ouellette and Hay’s versions of the consumer-citizen deal mainly with consumption of public and social services.

“good citizenship” is actualized within a consumerist framework of economic rationality and self-entrepreneurialism. Each formation is discussed below.

First, however, I want to underscore that these categories should *not* be understood or regarded as mutually exclusive subjectivities or practices as they often overlap, are motivated by the same desires and goals or may at times manifest simultaneously. Instead, these two “arenas” aim to clarify the scholarly literature on consumer-citizenship across various research traditions and serve as a heuristic device for the remainder of this dissertation. Additionally, dividing consumer-citizenship in this way offers what I believe is a clearer and more manageable way of locating expressions or acts of consumer-citizenship in the *distinct* context of consumer-reviewing (hence, “prosumer citizenship”).

Consumer-citizenship/activism. The first formation is reflective of what Daunton and Hilton (2001) refer to as the “material culture of politics” in which the act of buying things is tied to political struggles and accounts for a wider [global] politics at the site of consumption.⁵² Similarly, Trentmann’s (2007) survey of the literature on consumer-citizenship breaks down the politics of consumption into two related but distinct “principal arenas” in which one such arena encompasses consumption as a form of political identification and mobilization around issues of social and environmental justice (e.g., fair trade, sweatshop labor and other related concerns). In this mode of consumer politics, the act of boycotting or buycotting, for instance, serves “as an alternative sphere of political action and inclusion” for marginalized groups historically “excluded from the formal body politic” (p. 149). Identifying expressions of consumer-citizenship in this way thus reflects Micheletti’s (2003, p. 2) definition of political consumerism as:

⁵² Daunton and Hilton (2001) break up “the politics of consumption” as historically operating in two different ways; the “politics of material culture,” they argue, is distinct from the “material culture of politics.”

[A]ction by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices. Their choices are based on attitudes and values concerning issues of justice, fairness, or noneconomic issues that concern personal and family well-being and ethical or political assessment of favorable and unfavorable business and government practice[s].

In their articulation of political consumerism and consumer movements, Kozinets and Handelman (2004) argue that there are two types of politically-motivated consumers: one, those concerned with changing practices, principles and policies (i.e., individuals who advocate on behalf of other consumers and producers to insure protections from businesses and marketers); and two, those who employ an anti-consumerist ideology to which global capitalism is the main target. Expressions of political consumerism, therefore, take many different forms that range from pragmatic alternative shopping behaviors (e.g., ethical consumption, “localvores”) to more direct forms of public advocacy (e.g., boycotting, letter-writing) to anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist critiques (e.g., culture jamming).

This variation of consumer politics, therefore, describes a more active, agitative and/or *activist* consumer identity. As it applies to prosumption in the form of consumer reviewing, the consumer-citizen or consumer-activist might utilize Yelp as a space to recommend or criticize a business on the grounds of establishing, sustaining or elevating ethical standards of consumption (e.g., a business that serves fair trade coffee, contributes to ecological initiatives) (Bernstein & Campling, 2006, p. 429).⁵³ Consumer-citizens/activists on Yelp may also use the site as a way of

⁵³ Bernstein and Campling (2006) point out that while fair trade initiatives are not without their problems, Friedberg (2003) has suggested that consumer-citizenship leads to “a double fetishism” in which “the masking of social relations of production combine with the commoditization of the knowledge about the commodity itself” (citing Daviron and Ponte, p. 430). Transparency issues also arise “when information on commodity production and circulation is embedded in standardized and externally verified labels and certifications. The label then becomes a cheap substitute for intimate knowledge of the commodity and of producers” (Bernstein & Campling, 2006, p. 229).

promoting localism or local consumption with the expressed intent of keeping money within their communities, or as a way of *reconnecting* producers with consumers – the latter being a relationship ostensibly lost in the modernization process. Those who may engage in a more anti-consumerist ideology may use Yelp as a site for “culture jamming” or other forms of rhetorical subversion that confronts neoliberal cultural sites on explicitly political terms.

Empowered consumption. This second arena of consumption echoes Dauntton and Hilton’s (2001) “politics of material culture” – a liberal economic approach to the consumer that regards individuals as rational economic actors. From this standpoint, the politics of material culture discursively construct a universal or common “consumer interest” in which access to information enables consumers to make the best or most rational choices; for this reason, Cohen (2001, 2003) has identified this discursive construction as the “customer-consumer.” Similarly, Trentmann describes this version as the second “principal arena” of consumer politics as one based in a discourse of neoliberal citizenship that situates “the identity of the consumer as a subject and object of politics” (p. 150). Grounded in economic rational choice theory, the application of free market principles to all sectors of society and social life presents the responsibilities of citizenship in consumerist terms; the “good citizen” is thus one who maximizes the self *not* through society or collective action but through private and individual choices made in the spheres of lifestyle and consumption. Thus, entrepreneurial citizens who act as “empowered consumers” are those who manage the self by exercising rational choices in the marketplace (Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009). Related to this strand of consumer-citizenship is the Foucault-inspired scholarship that presents these new obligations as a form of neoliberal governance (e.g., Ouellette & Hay, 2008).

Unlike the consumer-citizen or consumer-activist, the empowered consumer emerges within a particular socio-historical context in which “the civic potential of consumption has received impetus from neoliberalism and the backlash of new social movements” (Trentmann, 2007, p. 148). As traditional means of identification dissolve with the decline in production-oriented identities (e.g., labor politics, class affiliation), citizens increasingly come to find the realm of consumption as a more desirable and effective space for political action (Meijer, 1998; Scammell, 2000). As mentioned, the mobilization of consumer politics within the contemporary political economy demonstrates the far-reaching influence of neoliberal governance in which the ethos of the market has diffused beyond the political and economic realms into the domain of human social life. As a political project aimed at “re-regulating society” through market rationalization, neoliberalism posits that the best way to govern is through privatization, personal responsibility and consumer choice which relies on the self-regulation of individuals (Schild, 2007, p. 180).⁵⁴ The neoliberal citizen-consumer is thus distinct from other previous or co-existing formations; its ethos of self-help and entrepreneurialism instructs “citizens that they can reinvent themselves continually through the process of consumption” and thus “presents consumption as a stand-in for citizenship” (Jubas, 2007, p. 232, 237).⁵⁵

Additionally, neoliberal “empowered consumers” are also expected to act independently of the state by “autonomously making choices as they navigate responsibly the panoply of options in the social field” (Schild, 2007, p. 187). While Schild is writing specifically about the governing of social welfare programs under neoliberalism, her description applies to consumer-citizens of privatized services, as well. As it applies to Yelp, the act of consumer reviewing can

⁵⁴ As a result, health, education and other public services have all been thoroughly restructured along market lines.

⁵⁵ Numerous critics have also pointed out that the neoliberal citizen-consumer’s ideological grounding in free market rationalization has in many ways propelled us backwards by merely aggravating many of the problems consumer politics once aimed to redress (e.g., Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009; Stole, 2009).

therefore be looked at as a tool that assists in rationalizing a system of governance based on “self-empowerment as a condition for citizenship” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). If a citizen’s most important and pressing obligation to society is to empower the self privately, then consumer review sites like Yelp offer the means with which this can occur. Yelp “diffuses and amplifies the governance of everyday life” by offering consumers a way to empower themselves with recommendations for consuming and living – not only where to shop, but what to do, what to eat and how to do these things most efficiently. Yelp offers citizen-consumers not only the space to obtain necessary information about the “best ways” to spend their money, but also provides the opportunity for consumers to act responsibly as citizens and offer information to others so that they might do the same. Attached to this form of consumer-citizenship, of course, is the “ideological baggage” that accompanies neoliberal modes of citizenship.

Conclusion: Prosumer-Citizenship and Yelp

This research sees a complimentary if not “natural” relationship between prosumption and consumer-citizenship – an under-theorized relationship in related literature. As multifarious and complex practices, both prosumption and consumer-citizenship are forms of productive talk or activities based on consumption practices and experiences that share a number of similar social, political and economic implications for consumer capitalism, empowerment and consumer agency. While consumer-review sites on the surface may be a highly depoliticized form of participation because of their basis in consumption-oriented discourse, consumer reviews also embody all of Juba’s (2007) “six Rs;” for example, consumer reviews serve as “the endorsement or rejection of commercial goods and services” and are thus “associated with the expression of political will” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 91). On sites like Yelp, the productivity of consumption extends *beyond* the point-of-sale; taken online, the production of *talk* or other social

activity around consumption can effectively shape production processes, popular culture, brand images or serve as a means of resistance to corporate power (Harold, 2007). By endorsing or rejecting commercial (or local) goods and services, consumers are voicing their reasons with judgment in a way that circumvents the brand image carefully manufactured by well-paid marketing and ad firms. Through the expression of personal experience, consumers thus inform and influence the decision-making processes of others they do not know, which can have direct implications for the local economy in any given community. In an age of civic decline, it is not improbable that many consumer reviewers spend more time justifying their endorsements or rejections of local vendors than local political candidates or on public, “non-consumer” issues (Micheletti & Stolle, 2005; Scammell, 2000).

Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) actually identify Yelp as an “immaterial form of prosumption” in which users are given control over content production through reviews, complements, and discussion forums (Yelp’s “Talk” threads). As suggested earlier, an important outcome of “prosumer control” is that reputation becomes increasingly difficult to manage as consumer-review sites like Yelp amplify word-of-mouth to friends and strangers, locals and visitors alike (often to the chagrin of local business owners). From the standpoint of prosumer theory, the assumption is that for every consumer-review posted, a degree of monopoly power is stripped from advertisers and businesses that have long controlled much of what consumers knew or understood about commodity goods and services. From this perspective, consumer reviewing [as a form of prosumption] can be said to democratize communication and culture by shifting the relations of power away from the established culture and knowledge industries, and back in favor of consumers (Jenkins, 2006). On Yelp, for example, the site is entirely based the notion that consumer reviewing gives voice to people *other than* those who have traditionally

owned the means of production (e.g., business owners), and those who have long controlled the production and distribution information (e.g., marketers, advertisers, mainstream media, the Yellow Pages). Yelp's entire premise is based on the idea that the best and most trusted recommendations for things to do, places to go and what services to employ typically come from family, friends, or colleagues – not advertisers, marketers, or business itself. The underlying assumption here, of course, is that “other” sources have ulterior motives and are thus inherently less trustworthy.

Scholars have argued that the productive involvement in participatory web cultures (like Yelp) contains the traditional aspects of citizenship in some forms, but to this point have not included consumer-reviewing in such analyses (e.g., Dahlgren, 1995; Jenkins, 2006; Meijer, 1998; Papacharissi, 2010). Thus, it is possible that the activity of consumer-reviewing can harness the collective power of prosumers to transform aspects of consumer culture, and with decidedly political outcomes at that. However, it is also important to remember that consumer-citizenship is a discursive practice; as such, it assumes that we cannot evade the market but rather can *change* it by engaging, agitating or demanding more equitable, fair or socially beneficial practices. As Nickel and Eikenberry (2009) note, such activities and practices fail to promote the idea of stopping consumption altogether. This latter point is, to some extent, a shortcoming of the dominant modes and articulations of consumer-citizenship – particularly the perspective common to Trentmann's (2007) second “principle arena” of scholarship that situates the citizen-consumer as part of the larger neo-liberal project (what I refer to as “empowered consumption”). However, heeding Nickel and Eikenberry's point, this research maintains that there is critical value in consumer-citizenship (and consumer activism in particular), while also recognizing the potential of consumer-citizenship to effectively *reproduce* social, cultural and

political economic inequalities inherent to capitalist markets (see Jubas, 2007; Kuehn, 2009; Littler, 2009; Nickel & Eikenberry; Stole, 2008 for discussions of these critiques). However, this research also recognizes that even anti-consumerism, for example, is at best an *alternative* consumer identity that requires some form of consumption as its own discursive practice (Cross, 2002). Furthermore, it is also difficult to escape the centrality and importance of consumer-citizenship to 20th and 21st Century politics as revealed in the detailed consumer histories by Cohen (2001, 2003), Cross, and other scholars of consumer culture (Sassatelli, 2007); thus, consumer-citizenship should not be altogether ruled out as an effective means of political action. Rather, this project contends that there are various *kinds* (i.e., “arenas”) of consumer-citizenship, of which some formulations serve to effect more significant social, cultural and political economic change than others (and which also interact with specific historical and geographical contexts).

Orientation to the Research

The Digital Economy as Cybernetic Space

Research on new media and digital culture originates from a number of theoretical and methodological approaches, and these approaches are as varied as the disciplines, traditions and paradigms from which they emerge. While new media scholars have long insisted that the social practices occurring online should not be theorized as wholly separate from offline lived realities, scholars still point out the tendency of new media researchers to privilege one method of data collection over another. As Orgad (2005) notes, studies that attempt to combine online and offline methods of data collection often fail to successfully triangulate these two types of interactions “and the data they generated” (p. 51). Even as recently as 2007, Hardey reinforced the point that, “Web 2.0 resources are not isolated in a cyberspace silo but should be regarded as

active parts of urban life” (p. 876). Early on, Mitra and Schwartz (2001) identified the tendency of researchers to approach Internet scholarship from one of two traditions – a discursive focus or a behavioral focus – as indicative of the failure to see the interrelationship between discourse (texts) and behavior (users). By focusing solely on the virtual (the discursive) or the real (behavioral), new media scholars thereby reify boundaries between the two as distinct and separate worlds.

In order to understand how new technologies transform our conceptualization of space, scholars must get beyond reproducing the false dichotomy of the “real” (offline) and the “virtual” (online) worlds (Hardey, 2007; Mitra & Schwartz, 2001; Orgad, 2005). Rather, Internet scholarship must recognize how these spaces seamlessly merge into what Mitra and Schwartz have called the “cybernetic space” – that is, the dialectical “interplay of the real and the virtual” (p. 15). The cybernetic space privileges *neither* the real nor the virtual “but focuses on the fact that one cannot exist without the other and we constantly live in both” (p. 15). With this in mind, the Internet should not be treated as a “tool” for entering a virtual “online” world; rather, its diffusion into our everyday lives situates the Internet as a tool used to *mediate between* our offline and online lived experiences. As the cybernetic space suggests, “there are situations where the discursive and the behavioral merge so that the consequences of this merging defy explanation if approached from the perspectives of the cyber or real separately” (p. 17). Through the consideration of *both* discourses *and* behavior, therefore, this dissertation thus attempts to approach the “field” of research as one that exists in a mutually constituted *cybernetic* space.

Cybernetic space, however, also exists within particular political, economic and social structures and is not as nebulous or ungrounded as Mitra and Schwartz (2001) might suggest. Terranova (2000) uses the term *digital economy* to describe the space in which prosumption

activities (or productive consumption more generally) unfolds in a manner that blurs the traditional distinctions between production and consumption, labor and culture. Accordingly, the *digital economy* also accounts for the ways these traditionally “distinct” spheres merge:

As a term, it seems to describe a formation that intersects on the one hand with the postmodern cultural economy (the media, the university, and the arts) and on the other hand with the information industry (the information and communication complex). Such an intersection of two different fields of production constitutes a challenge to a theoretical and practical engagement with the question of labor, a question that has become marginal for media studies as compared with questions of ownership (within political economy) and consumption (within cultural studies). (Terranova, p. 35)

Citing work by Barbrook (1997), Terranova also describes the digital economy as a “mixed economy” that includes public elements (e.g., state-sponsored technological developments; civic projects), private or market-driven interests (e.g., consumer sites; commodification of user labor), and elements of a gift economy (e.g., altruistic information-sharing, open-source projects and anti-capitalist disruptions).

Conceptualizing the Internet as a cybernetic space also echoes Terranova’s (2000) call to consider the “outernet” in new media studies, which she describes as:

the network of social, cultural, and economic relationships that crisscrosses and exceeds the Internet [and] surrounds and connects the latter to larger flows of labor, culture, and power. It is fundamental to move beyond the notion that cyberspace is about escaping reality in order to understand how the reality of the Internet is deeply connected to the development of late postindustrial societies as a whole. (p. 34)

Taking these multifarious and complex characteristics of the digital economy and cybernetic space into consideration, this dissertation attempts to ground a case study of Yelp in an analysis of production, labor and cultural practices that accounts for the “mixed economy” of the digital world that also considers the ways by which issues of ownership (Chapter One and Three), production (Chapters Three, Four and Five), labor (Chapter Five) and consumption (Chapters Three, Four and Five) converge in this “third” cybernetic space. Through a critical lens, this research looks at both discourses *and* behavior as mutually constituted phenomenon; whereas “behavior” occurs both online and offline and both mediates and is mediated *by* online and offline interactions, cybernetic space becomes a useful construct for making sense of this interplay. This is a research project that draws from multiple methods and at times, multiple methodologies as a way of accounting for, integrating *and* triangulating the myriad components of the digital economy and cybernetic space. Like consumption itself, all digital writing, while mediated by the technology’s affordances and capabilities, is ultimately produced through human actions – even if those human actions are at times dependent on the human actions of others (e.g., computer programmers, corporate headquarters or others who may or may not “act” in accordance with the laws and logics of economics to shape how production and consumption play out) (DePew, 2007). Thus, neither discourse nor behavior in the cybernetic space (as ruled by the structures of the digital economy) can be viewed as wholly separate functions.

Methodological Overview

In a discussion of methodological approaches to digital technology, DePew (2007) writes: “Like microscope or satellites, methodologies are technologies for seeing, and they, like all organic and prosthetic eyes, filter and construct realities and knowledge” (p. 68). As a case study that is theoretically grounded in the critical-cultural tradition, this project “filters and

constructs realities and knowledge” through a subjective researcher lens aimed at uncovering how power and dominance is enacted and reclaimed through the cybernetic space. This research looks at power and dominance in the domain of consumer-generated content or *prosumption* in the digital economy; specifically, it identifies the production of discourse around consumer-citizenship in a locally place-based cybernetic space and aims to understand how this discourse both shapes and is shaped by offline relationships, behaviors and interactions. In other words, this study is primarily interested in how “the behavior in the real can become influenced by the discourse encountered in the cyber” (Mitra & Schwartz, 2001, p. 17). In the context of consumer reviewing on local listing sites, prosumption as a discursive practice is based on the everyday practices and experiences of *consumption*. Yelp exists as a space for consumers to critique businesses and services on the basis of their personal consumption experiences of the products and services made available by establishments. Consumer reviewing, even when celebratory, is a discursive practice (and a potentially *critical* discursive practice, at that). Thus, I approach this research with the belief that the production of talk and texts (i.e., discourse) is inextricably tied to “the politics of consumption” even where “politics” take the form of *anti-politics*, or no politics at all.

Admittedly, some parts of this research are also informed by a social constructionist approach that follows the logic of qualitative inquiry more so than a critical-cultural paradigm (Warren & Karner, 2005). In distinguishing these paradigms, Rubin and Rubin (2005) point out that critical researchers tend to approach research that can “redress past oppression [and] bring problems to light...In this model, knowledge does not exist outside the perceiver”; rather, researchers “explicitly take sides by studying underdog groups...the truth they study is the reality of oppression” (p. 25). Interpretive constructionist researchers, on the other hand, look at

how people view an object or event and the meaning that they attribute to it is what is important... [they] expect people to see somewhat different things...they pay attention to the shared meanings held by those in a *cultural arena* – a setting in which people have in commons matters such as religion, history, work tasks...political interests, etc. (p. 28)

These distinctions are most evident in Chapters Four and Five where the strategies for data analysis borrow heavily from qualitative content analysis in its focus on *meaning*, and the process by which meaning is created and understood by members in the Yelp community (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Warren & Karner). This tendency to blur paradigms has both practical and theoretical justifications. On a practical level, while I epistemologically align with a critical orientation, I am formally trained in qualitative research design from an interpretive approach and believe the latter adds a degree of rigor, reliability and credibility to the former. Thus, I do not see this as a shortcoming as a critical Internet researcher; in fact, it is only fitting that I would embrace a hybrid researcher identity in the study of hybrid subjectivities that occur in a hybrid space (e.g., production/consumption, citizen/consumer, public/private, real/virtual). On a theoretical level, borrowing from qualitative methods of inquiry that are traditionally used by constructionists reflects the interdisciplinary nature of not only critical-cultural studies but Internet research in general. While critical/cultural and interpretive paradigms may ontologically and epistemologically conflict in some ways, the claims made and conclusions drawn ultimately re-situate this research back into a critical/cultural methodological paradigm. However, contrary to Rubin and Rubin's (2005) distinction between the two, I would not say that this is only a study about the "reality of oppression" as doing so immediately relegates all Yelpers as an oppressed group whose perceived sense of "agency" is merely an operation of false consciousness. This project does not take that approach. Furthermore, many of my findings are constructed around

knowledge “perceived” by my participants and assembled accordingly. Thus, while I remain critical in my interpretations and conclusions, it would not be fair to say this research has also not been constructed with some degree of *intersubjectivity* (particularly in Chapter Five) in which the research findings are constructed between myself (the researcher) and my participant subjects (the “researched”) (Warren & Karner).

Methods

This case study employs an analysis of structures (e.g., ownership, site architecture), content (e.g., consumer-generated reviews and discourse) and behaviors (e.g., user perspectives and practices via interviews). Being that this dissertation draws from a number of methods and techniques of data collection and analysis, I offer a detailed explanation of these tools and strategies at the beginning of each subsequent chapter. However, much of this research employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) in the tradition of Fairclough (2003) and van Dijk (1993), which is concerned with how powerful groups control public discourse as a way of reproducing dominance, ideologies (and thus ideological dominance) and hegemony. One of the key reasons I selected this strategy is because CDA is useful for relating macro-level issues of dominance and exploitation with micro-level actions such as talk, text, meaning and understanding (van Dijk, p. 280) which makes it possible to consider structures, content and behavior simultaneously. As a method for analysis, CDA *assumes* that power and domination are reproduced in discourse (text and talk), and that there exists an identifiable relationship between discourse and power. The underlying sociopolitical goal of uncovering power relations, therefore, offers researchers a degree of freedom that other disciplines, paradigms or schools of thought limit in the attempt to retain consistency of some philosophical internal logic. This is not to suggest that CDA is inherently rife with ontological and epistemological contradictions; rather, CDA takes a

multidisciplinary approach in which “theories, descriptions, methods and empirical work are chosen or elaborated *as a function of their relevance* for the realization of such a sociopolitical goal” (van Dijk, p. 252, emphasis added). Thus, it is for this reason I believe that CDA is oftentimes regarded as perhaps a bit more “loosey-goosey” than other qualitative methods of analysis; however, as elaborated above the nature of the Internet as it relates to the digital economy and cybernetic space seemingly *requires* this sort of interdisciplinarity, particularly in the application of both theory *and* methods. While CDA researchers are not necessarily known for self-disclosing their approaches to data collection and analysis, I have consciously attempted to be as reflexive as possible when outlining my methods for data collection and analysis, as well as where I situate myself as a researcher in these processes.

Conclusion

Since critical data analysts take a social position, my approach to research thus rejects the notion of a “value free” social science. It seems important to note, however, that at the same time this project does not aim to uncover any identifiable and fixed “Truths” that may be located or “emerge” from the data as if it has been existing there all along, waiting to be uncovered. Rather, my goal in this project is to produce what Baptiste (2001) calls a “defensible perspective” in which claims made are acknowledged as my own, but triangulated in the context of both theory and data. I acknowledge that I enter this research with a specific sociopolitical position, albeit one that is perhaps somewhat less critical than some cyber-dystopianists (e.g., Keen, 2007). I do, however, align myself with the perspective of the prosumer – the consumer reviewer, the free laborer – to understand their experiences and perceptions and practices. But by taking this position I am decidedly *not* taking the position of those who own the site of prosumption – Yelp’s owners, investors, capitalists. I am also not necessarily concerned with whether or not the

limitations or regulations these owners impose on speech and participation are *intended* to delimit freedom, or if they are the function of some other sociopolitical motivation. From an epistemological standpoint, therefore, I approach this research as a critical analyst who believes discourse reproduces a hierarchy of power, and that there is *a better way*; I at times make normative judgments on existing social relations with the (unapologetic) belief that unfettered prosumption and some aspects of consumer activism are a start in creating more equitable distribution of rights, access and privileges.

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Chapter Three

The Structures of Participation:

An Analysis of Yelp's Promotional Discourse & Architecture

The first half of this study offers a critical analysis of Yelp in order to understand how the site's promotional discourse and virtual geography frames, enables and/or delimits consumer agency and power within the sphere of a popular local listing site. This section aims also to problematize the constructs of prosumption and consumer-citizenship by analyzing these activities within Yelp's online political economy. Thus, this section addresses the following research questions: 1) How does Yelp's promotional rhetoric discursively construct consumer reviewing and user participation? 2) How does Yelp function as a space for prosumption and, in turn, consumer-citizenship? Upon establishing Yelp as a space in which prosumption and consumer-citizenship can emerge, the question then becomes: 3) How, and to what degree, does Yelp discursively and structurally enable and/or delimit consumer agency and power?

To answer these questions, this chapter begins with an analysis of Yelp's promotional discourse to understand how Yelp frames the site's intended use and functions as a venue for prosumption and, potentially, consumer-citizenship. This will be addressed by first looking at theories of prosumption within the framework of Yelp's participatory web culture; from there, I address the potential relationship between prosumption (via consumer-reviewing) and consumer-citizenship as it emerges in the context of Yelp's promotional strategies. Only by first demonstrating how the site fits the parameters of prosumption, I argue, can Yelp be understood as a space where prosumers (i.e., "Yelpers") can assert their consuming selves as [local] citizens. In turn, this also situates local listing sites like Yelp into larger theoretical debates about the affordances of digital technology, shifting power, and consumer citizenship.

After establishing local listing sites as a space for prosumption and consumer-citizenship, this section then offers a critical analysis of Yelp's architecture to address how Yelp structurally enables or constrains the possibilities for consumer-citizenship to emerge. Yelp's business model is also referenced in the sense that it informs the site's architectural design, as well. This chapter concludes that participation on Yelp is discursively and architecturally structured in a way that is biased towards consumer ideologies, thus *delimiting* its political potential for consumer-citizenship and activism, especially at the local level. Regarding the latter, this chapter also demonstrates not only the power of brand management in online participatory web cultures but the limitations brand strategies can place on prosumer agency. Specifically, this chapter inadvertently also lends legitimacy to studies of the relationship between brand management, the architecture of online space and user behavior. Analysis reveals that while Yelp promotes itself as a brand for the empowered consumer, the site's virtual geography encourages participation in a highly commercial way that subordinates the "citizen" over that of the "consumer." As a result, the practice of prosumption is structured as a depoliticized form of interaction that strategically constrains a public-minded approach to consumption and thus the citizen-consumer construct. Ultimately, this section of research demonstrates that as a socio-cultural system, Yelp's commercial orientation highlights some of the shortcomings and realities inherent to both theories of online prosumption and consumer-citizenship.

Consumer Reviewing and Consumer-Citizenship

While consumer reviewing may appear to be a highly depoliticized activity on the surface, it affords prosumers the power to collectively transform aspects of a broader consumer culture *and* local commerce specifically. The site holds enormous potential for shaping local community business practices and if effective, the outcomes of prosumption can be potentially

political in nature. However, in order for this type of change to occur from reviewing the local, the actual practice of consumer-reviewing requires prosumers to also “write” as local citizens. For example, consumer reviews can be used not only to critique food quality and customer service but labor practices, ethical issues, absentee ownership, food sourcing, health code violations or other topics distinct to the local experience. As a public social space, Yelp affords the opportunity for consumers to approach the review (and consumption) process through the lens of a local citizen. Much like the way *prosumption* blurs the line between citizen and consumer, Yelp similarly bridges two other traditionally oppositional binaries of consumer and citizen.

While Yelp’s promotional rhetoric does not utilize the term “consumer-citizenship,” the possibilities for politicized consumption through *prosumption* on Yelp are vast. Consumer-citizenship on Yelp, however, requires users to harness the site’s civic and political potential by creating a discourse that expands beyond surface-level observations of the consumption experience and to consider some deeper level of that business’s relationship to its community. *Prosumption* is not effective or transformative merely because it exists. Therefore, in order to understand Yelp as the potentially powerful tool it promotes itself as, it is necessary to first understand how *prosumption* on the site occurs. Specifically, to what degree does Yelp’s business model relinquish control to prosumers, and to what effect?

While the practice of consumer reviewing theoretically offers prosumers a virtual space for articulating consumer-citizenship, therein remains the question about the degree to which Yelp *affords* the opportunity for such practices to occur. Just giving people an open space to speak does not necessarily mean that there are no other barriers that delimit the range of possibilities. Yelp, after all, is a *brand* of *prosumption* that strategically promotes a specific

brand image through a number of structural devices, even if those devices *and* the brand image encourage a sense that no “structures” exist at all (Arvidsson, 2006). It is important, therefore, to first understand how Yelp promotes its brand of prosumption, and what vision of the site’s intended functions and use that the company markets.

Prosumption as Brand Strategy

In their article on “prosumer society,” Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) argue that Web 2.0 has ushered in a new form of prosumption that has been difficult for capitalists to control. This loss of control is a key reason why theorists like Toffler (1980), Jenkins (2006), Ritzer and Jurgenson view the producer-consumer collapse as a significant and potentially paradigmatic transformation. Unlike traditional forms of capitalism which sought to control the production and consumption processes, corporations now typically respond to the work of prosumers by “getting out of the way” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, p. 31). Although companies are still concerned with product quality, the abundance of unpaid contributors afforded by prosumption means companies can be less concerned with controlling the prosumption and production process. Thus, resisting the temptation to restrict or regulate prosumer creativity and other areas of the production process has become a strategic *brand strategy* (e.g., Donaton, 2006; Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). Celebratory approaches to prosumption tend to ignore the fact that many prosumer sites are commercial in orientation and thus rely on consumers not only for content (product) to fill the site’s pages, but also to generate *value* for the brand (Arvidsson, 2006). Unlike previous production-centered industrial capitalism where profitable products were what built brands, the brand is now considered a defining feature of late consumer capitalism. As Ritzer and Jurgenson note: “Now, the situation is largely reverse and it is the brand that comes first; the profitable product will follow” (p. 20).

So while it may appear on the surface that sites like Yelp do not try to regulate prosumer activity and engagement, this is not entirely accurate; there is no shortage of structural constraints and behavioral cues that aimed at guiding behavior in desired directions. Arvidsson's (2006) work on brand management raises the point that while sites like Yelp are "branded" as consumer-driven, companies also insures that the practice of consumer-reviewing takes place "within a number of more or less precise coordinates" (p. 245). These "coordinates" exist simultaneously "at the abstract level of 'mood' and 'feeling'" and the "construction of ambience," the latter of which occurs through the structure of physical space, architecture and site design (p. 245-246). In other words, while prosumption hinges on giving new media users "free reign" over the production process, it is important to remember that suggested modes of participation often *guide prosumption* in highly specific ways through brand management strategies.

This research acknowledges that a company's brand identity and intended use are sometimes resisted, re-appropriated or ignored by users; however, they must nevertheless be understood in order to identify when resistance to, re-appropriation or disregard for these goals actually occur. Later chapters will address the appropriation and subversion of Yelp's intended use and functions (see Chapter Four) but for now this section focuses specifically on how the technosocial affordances of Yelp's "architecture of participation" align with or contradict the site's promotional discourse and brand identity.

Methods

This discourse analysis compares and contrasts how Yelp discursively constructs user participation on the site with what the site's architectural structure actually affords. A comparative analysis of Yelp's promotional materials and virtual geography provides insight into

how the site's infrastructure and technosocial affordances shape the process and experience of content creation; additionally, this comparison also illuminates a great deal about how local listing sites like Yelp can be theoretically situated in the prosumption and consumer-citizenship literature. While I do not intend to argue that a site's promotional discourse or architectures of participation *determine* how users will ultimately engage with the site, the point here is that the rhetorical and structural features of a space can direct users towards desired ends (Arvidsson, 2006; Papacharissi, 2009). In other words, the way Yelp discursively structures participation can shape the type of participation and actions that occur, such as what users can say and do with the site.

This chapter looks specifically at two factors: one, the site's promotional discourse and two, the site's structures of participation (including the site's architecture, terms of service, privacy policy and other user agreements). The goal is to determine the degree to which these factors promote, delimit or constrain the potential for Yelp to serve as a space in which consumer-citizenship can unfold.

Data collection and analysis for both Yelp's promotional discourse and site architecture drew from van Dijk's (1993) and Fairclough's (2003) methods of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Papacharissi's (2009) application of CDA to social networking sites. For van Dijk, CDA aims to uncover "what structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events" reproduce or challenge dominance (p. 250). Both promotional discourse and online architectural space can be equally "read" as communicative events, albeit in different ways. While the former might be most obvious due to its basis in textual and linguistic form, the virtual geography of an online space can similarly be analyzed as discourse. Architecture, like language, communicates through its structure by guiding or

directing behavior, emotions and other actions. Space can thus be “read” as language, as a structured form of communication (i.e., discourse). Like language, architecture can delimit, condition or mobilize what Foucault theorized as “historically specific ‘strategic possibilities’ of meaning, understanding and practice” (Deacon, Pickering, Golding & Murdock, 1999). As a local listing site with social networking capabilities, therefore, Yelp was treated as a “site of sociocultural practice” in which all representational features were analyzed including language, aesthetics, cues, options, site features and other available choices (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 206). All related articles, materials, documents and information obtained about or on Yelp were treated as cultural texts yet focused predominantly on the way the aggregation of these texts worked to construct specific discourses.

Promotional Discourse

Data collection. To determine how Yelp’s discursively constructs user participation this section examined how Yelp frames the site’s intended functions and use through an analysis of the company’s promotional discourse. Data collection included Yelp press releases, new articles, advertisements, merchandise, Yelp’s weekly newsletters and other site documents serving promotional purposes. Specifically, newspaper articles and blogs published between the October 2004 (Yelp’s launch date) and June 2010 were obtained through a Lexis-Nexus search for the key term “Yelp.” Articles that did not pertain to the company or that only mentioned Yelp without comment were discarded. Additionally, since the focus of this section is on how Yelp itself, rather than news media, frames the site’s functions and usage, I paid particular attention to promotional press releases and news stories that featured direct quotes from company executives and employees.

In addition to the Lexis-Nexus search, all existing entries were collected from Yelp's two separate blogs – Yelp's "Official Web Blog," which contains technical information posted by Yelp administrators, and the Yelp "Community Blog," which reviews Elite parties, events and social activities posted by local Community Managers. All available entries were gathered for analysis (November 2005 through November 2010 for the Official Web Blog, and November 2008 through November 2010 for the Community Blog). Additional web content published on Yelp was also collected for analysis which included pages such as Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), About Us, Help and other publicly available content located throughout the site's index and subpages.

Sensitizing constructs. As a guide for the formation of themes, I began by developing a list of sensitizing constructs derived from the literature on the affordances of user-generated content. Sensitizing constructs are common in qualitative research as they provide a flexible entry point into data collection and analysis. Rather than pre-determined and operational definitions, sensitizing constructs act as variables that "alert" the focus of investigation; they are potentially relevant but dynamic constructs that act as "sensitizing probes of the scene" rather than static concepts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 69). The flexibility afforded by sensitizing constructs is that they often change throughout a study as theory, analysis and new data alter or change throughout the research process. This interactive approach helps insure the study's internal and conceptual validity as it is important that the researcher be accurately "measuring" or locating the right behaviors, actions, attitudes, statements, etc.

The sensitizing constructs evolved throughout this section and subsequent chapters of the study. Since the goal of this particular section was to understand how Yelp discursively constructs user participation, I paid particular attention to how the site promoted itself within the

celebratory rhetoric common amongst Web 2.0 technologies and sites; specifically, I drew from Benkler's (2006) work on the technosocial "affordances" of networked technologies as a primary sensitizing construct common to the techno-utopian perspective of participatory web cultures (e.g. Jenkins, 2006). After reading through the news articles for the first time, I expanded the sensitizing construct of "technosocial affordances" to the more inclusive and less architecturally-bound theory of "prosumption" (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Drawing from the various characteristics associated with prosumption, I approached the second reading of the collected data with more narrow sensitizing constructs of "control," "empowerment," "production" and "consumption," which describe key elements of prosumer theory. During this process, I paid particular attention to the descriptors, outcomes, functions and goals promised by Yelp in its promotional discourse that aligned with these sensitizing constructs.

Data analysis. Using the sensitizing constructs as a guide, all articles, press releases, blog entries and additional content on the Yelp website were read through once and then subsequently analyzed for repetitive themes. News articles and press releases were read and analyzed first, followed by Yelp's two sets of blogs and other site documents. After reading through the site blogs for the first time, however, no new or different themes were found that had not already been extracted from the articles, suggesting that the themes revealed in the initial discourse analysis had been largely exhausted. Thus, no new themes emerged from the site's blogs that had not already been found in the articles obtained through the Lexis-Nexus search. As a result, particular attention was subsequently paid to blog entries that supplemented information and themes found in the published articles and are used in this research as largely anecdotal data. However, the blog entries proved useful in that they offered a richer, detailed account of Yelp's intended functions and use than revealed in news articles and press releases.

Site Architecture

The second part of this chapter focuses specifically on Yelp's architectural features to uncover how the opportunities for prosumption promised by Yelp in its promotional discourse are structurally enabled or constrained by the actual online environment. An analysis of site architecture aimed to uncover how Yelp's underlying structure or available features might enable or delimit the activities of prosumption rhetorically promised by the company in its promotional discourse. I also assessed site architecture to determine what structural barriers or affordances might either prevent or promote participants from maximizing the site's potential towards consumer-citizenship.

Borrowing from Papacharissi's (2009) comparative study of social networking sites, site architecture is defined here as the "composite result of structure, design and organization" (p. 205). Since architecture is primarily concerned with medium characteristics, analysis included available features determined by programming code; it is less concerned with *content* than structural affordances, cues and other options that "suggests and enables particular modes of interaction" (Papacharissi, p. 201). Citing the work of Donath (2007), she also addresses the relationship between content and site structure by arguing that "site design promotes the development of particular culture or behaviors and identity presentation" (Papacharissi, p. 203). Since culture, behaviors and identity presentation in virtual spheres can be read only through written text, content cannot thereby be totally ignored. Thus, this chapter did not employ a systematic textual analysis of written content employed by users and Yelp but rather analyzed content to the degree that it informed the way Yelp employs architecture to create a certain type of social space – for example, how various subpages on the site were featured, labeled and indexed, or how (and which) available features within a particular subpage were organized or

highlighted to promote a certain “type” of participation, etc. In order to document these features, systematic notes recorded reoccurring lexical features across the site’s various pages that contributed to shaping the Yelp environment.

As a registered Yelp member, I regularly accessed, navigated and examined the site’s features, infrastructure, social networking capabilities, sub-sites and organizational structure over a ten-month period from May 2010 to February 2011.⁵⁶ During this time I periodically surveyed and tracked Yelp’s architectural design, from the site’s index page to various subpages linked throughout. Any changes, updates or new options to existing features were noted. Drawing from similar research performed by Fernback (2007), Yelp’s publicly posted contractual agreements including its terms of service, review guidelines and privacy statements were also collected and read to better understand how users were encouraged to engage with the site, and what types of behaviors and uses the company’s written policies prohibited or sanctioned. While data analysis focused primarily on site options and features, Yelp’s content and aesthetics were also analyzed to better understand how online architecture contributed to inform the type of social space Yelp promotes (Papacharissi, 2009).

The findings from the architectural analysis were then compared and contrasted with the type of activity promised by Yelp’s promotional discourse, which pointed to a disconnect between the rhetorical promises of empowered consumption and the site’s enacted constraints. A comparative analysis of Yelp’s structures of participation and promotional discourse also raised a number of critical questions about how prosumers conform to and/or resist the site’s architecture

⁵⁶ I have been a registered member on Yelp since January 2010 and spent several months getting used to the site before I began a systematic evaluation in May 2010.

or stated desired goals in unexpected or unintended ways; these latter issues are addressed more specifically Chapter Four.⁵⁷

Findings (Part 1)

Yelp's Promotional Discourse

*There's got to be a review democracy!
And that's Yelp. By the People, For the People
Review your hat maker, beard groomer, church's steeple ...
Our forefathers would approve this new way to help
Real people, Real reviews, Head directly to Yelp!*
- Yelp video advertisement, 2009

In its most blatant appropriation of “democracy,” the above lyrics appeared in a user-generated video advertisement made for a promotional screening of the documentary *Beer Wars* (Anat Baron, 2009) sponsored by Yelp in April 2009.⁵⁸ The video parody stars the internet-celebrity comedian Remy Munasifi dressed as Abe Lincoln, who raps over a re-mixed version of the song, *Yankee Doodle*. The commercial actually opens with a re-written version of the Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation declaring “henceforth and forevermore” that Yelp “does hereby forthwith emancipate the people of this great nation from the shackles of poor beer choices...”

While the ad is clearly meant to be funny, its themes of emancipation and democracy reinforce Yelp's larger rhetorical strategies that promote its brand of consumer-reviewing as one that will finally *free* consumers and local businesses alike from the longstanding “pay to play” economy. Despite avoiding explicitly political statements, the Yelp brand rhetorically appropriates such themes in order to market itself at the forefront of political-economic change.

A critical discourse analysis of statements and advertisements produced by Yelp since 2004

⁵⁷ Additionally, this comparative analysis also illuminates the potential affordances and practical limitations of prosumption within the particular context of commercially-oriented local listing sites.

⁵⁸ The entire commercial can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaOmTvXkz4E>

reveals a bottom-up, anti-corporate, *anti-establishment* sentimentality common to the popular rhetoric of disruptive technologies. Specifically, the site's pro-consumer orientation reinforces claims made about Web 2.0's democratizing potential, particularly as it applies to the participatory nature of consumer-generated content and prosumption (e.g., Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2003). Through press releases, advertisements, site content and news interviews, Yelp's management and board of directors rhetorically position the site within a larger discursive framework that has long promised new technologies will democratize communication and culture. By positioning itself as an arbiter of unprecedented freedom and control from established industries, professionals and big business, Yelp engages a promotional rhetoric of democracy and citizenship through the practice of consumer reviewing. Additionally, Yelp promotes itself as a site that not only enables but relies upon prosumption for the citizen-consumer to emerge; this is often underscored by the point that consumer-generated content has the power to shape commerce and other economic and social processes distinctly local in orientation. The promotional discourse of the site thus constructs Yelp as a space in which the consumer-citizen can emerge to effect real change within his or her community.

Yelp's promotional discourse consistently draws upon four interrelated themes to describe its intended uses and functions that echo the techno-utopian perspective of prosumption: The act of "Yelping" creates: 1) A power shift from business to consumers; 2) Truth, Trust and Transparency; 3) Community; and 4) Consumer Protection.

Power shift. One of the most predominant themes that emerges from Yelp's promotional discourse is the claim that its particular brand of consumer-reviewing works to shift power away from businesses and into the hands of consumers. This claim echoes a common assertion made by Jenkins (2006) and others who argue that new media technologies have ushered in a paradigm

shift that is fundamentally transforming relations of power across traditional modes of communication. From this perspective, communication is shifting from a top-down, hierarchical model of mass media to a decentralized, bottom-up *new media* model of “mass conversation” (Spurgeon, 2008). An analysis of Yelp’s promotional discourse reveals that the company views itself as part of this power shift. Yelp promotes itself at the forefront of change, particularly through the voice of CEO Jeremy Stoppelman who repeatedly promotes the company as an arbiter of transformation with public statements like, “Media is [*sic*] shifting...The power has shifted from businesses with money to little guys who perform” (Fost, 2008, para 8). He also states: “We’ve ceded unprecedented power to consumers, but this simply means power once wielded by an elite few is now in the hands of all.” (Stoppelman, 2009a, para 6). Similarly, Stoppelman has also responded to pending lawsuits and extortion allegations charged by local businesses as a demonstration of the “old guard’s” refusal to adapt to this changing economic and cultural power dynamic: “There’s simply anger over the accountability that Yelp brings and also this feeling of powerlessness because so much power is now being put in the hands of the consumer” (Pattison, 2010, para 13). Yelp is the “New World Order” with which business owners struggle (Donaker, quoted in Richards, 2009, para 31).

This power shift is inextricably tied to a larger belief that digital technology is changing the way business has traditionally been done; therefore, Yelp contributes to the belief that presumption – in this case, the act of writing consumer-generated reviews – has irrevocably altered the future. Specifically, Yelp claims to restructure the ways by which consumers obtain, produce and use information. In order to demonstrate this process “works” for the consumer, Yelp frequently promotes stories or specific instances of where “Yelping” facilitated some degree of positive change. For example, several of Yelp’s blog entries and news articles discuss

the way some restaurants have voluntarily changed their reservations policies, menus items, staff training, hiring and firing practices or other business-related issues that consumers have complained about in their Yelp reviews. By publicly acknowledging both the frustration of business owners as well as examples of how Yelp “works” for the consumer structures a rhetorical defense against negative press in that both are equally situated as demonstrations of unprecedented consumer power.

Truth, trust, transparency. In addition to facilitating a shift in power, Yelp also promises unprecedented truth, trust and transparency. If anything, there is a direct relationship between these two promises in that the latter (truth, trust and transparency) is merely an outcome of the former (power shift). Yelp promotes the site as a space where users can speak openly and honestly about their consumer experiences, and the site promotes this ability as the exercise of one’s democratic rights. In an op-ed to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, for example, Yelp’s CEO employs this rhetoric in his defense of consumer reviewing: “We at Yelp stand strongly behind consumers recognizing their right to speak truthfully about their experiences (positive or negative). In America it’s called protected speech” (Stoppelman, 2009b, para 7). In this statement, Stoppelman bridges the “truthfulness” of consumer-reviewing with the democratic rights of citizens (e.g., free speech), again rhetorically positioning the act of “Yelping” as inextricably bound to one’s political rights.

Working backwards, this “politics of truth-telling” infers that before Yelp’s arrival to the scene, a lot of lying had been going on in the world of business and advertising; a deception that Yelp users now work to set straight. According to Yelp’s Outreach Manager, “Yelp thrives and is trustworthy because the reviews are unsolicited” (Faturechi, 2010, para 14). Similarly, the site claims that “There’s no pulling punches on Yelp, no unnecessary pleasantries, just the

unmitigated delightful truth that is lacking in most other review sites and city guides” (Yelp! Inc., 2005a). This belief that the information services market has been long dominated by less-than-truthful content, policies and advertising schemes positions Yelp as an inherently more truthful and trustworthy source than the compromised opinions of paid professionals: “People turn to their friends and colleagues far more than to other sources of information because the source is unlikely to have an ulterior motive, they are not out to sell them something” (Yelp! Inc., 2005b). In other words, Yelp promotes itself as a more trustworthy source because its users are not prompted to write in any particular way. Yelp’s COO addresses the longstanding power that businesses previously had over their own reputations that consumer reviews have systematically dismantled: “Maybe customers weren’t happy...but [businesses] could market their way out of it” (quoted in Richards, 2009, para 31). Implicit to these claims of truthfulness, and underscoring the company’s brand as a disruptive technology, is the notion that consumers can trust Yelp because they cannot always trust business.

Because Yelp deems its consumer-generated content as “more true,” it is thereby logically considered to be “more trustworthy.” Trustworthiness is thus another common promotional device used to describe Yelp’s value: “Yelp provides a valuable service to millions of consumers and businesses based on our trusted content” (Sollitto quoted in Wauters, 2010). However, trustworthiness is not granted to just anyone but must be achieved through *transparency*, a practice interrelated to truth and trustworthiness.⁵⁹ Yelp often instructs users to voluntarily disclose personal information and to frequently write reviews in order to establish

⁵⁹ Transparency issues and lack of trust become increasingly problematic for Yelp by 2009 after highly-publicized class-action lawsuits were filed against the company for extortion and libel. As a result, Yelp launched an aggressive public relations campaign in response, using not only the mainstream media but its own blog to “correct” the myths about Yelp’s non-transparent filtering mechanism supposedly designed to bury “untrustworthy” reviews. However, Yelp’s lack of transparency about how the site’s filtering mechanism works has not only affected the site’s relationship with business owners but risks eroding users’ trust in the site – especially as users with “transparent” profiles try to make sense of why their content disappears from Yelp without warning or explanation.

credibility and trustworthiness: “From a reader perspective, the less you contribute, the less valuable you frankly are to the community. The more we know about you, the more we can trust you” (Stoppelman, quoted in Kamenetz, 2008). Frequent, voluntary disclosures and reviews are two key ways for distinguishing credible consumers from corporate “shills,” “trolls” and marketers; it is also a way of preventing the “old guard” from *rupturing* this newfound consumer power.⁶⁰

Yelp’s management understands that the site’s entire value “is bound up with the integrity of [its] review system” (Rushe, 2009). In addition to promoting itself as a trustworthy venue, the site also heavily promotes its architectural changes and new mobile features as motivated by the goal of increasing trust and transparency. Changes to Yelp’s automatic filtering mechanism (which many businesses allege is Yelp’s way of extorting advertising contracts from them) were promoted with the goal of making the “automated review filter even more transparent” (Yelp! Inc., 2010). Yelp also promoted its mobile “check-in” feature as a measure of credibility, which allows users to notify other friends in their social network when they have visited or are inside a business. According to Yelp’s product manager: “Check-ins are a way to make its users’ reviews more authoritative...If you go to a business often enough, you get a special badge deeming you a regular of a place. It adds an extra layer of credibility to a review online” (Wortham, 2010, para 20).

In sum, promoting truth, trust and transparency as selling points to legitimize the site’s public credibility implies that prior to Yelp, individuals consumed with less factual or even deceptive information and knowledge. Truth, trust and transparency are thus inherently a part of

⁶⁰ Transparency is also central to becoming a “Yelp Elite” member, the most frequent and visible contributors on the site. Yelp Elite members share more personal information, use their real names and must also display a recent photograph in order to maintain Elite status. Because they are known and visible, the “Elite Squad” eliminates reviewer anonymity and minimizes the potential for shilling; they are, in effect, unpaid Yelp “experts” that other users can instinctively trust.

the paradigmatic power shift ushered in by the practice of consumer-reviewing itself. By bounding these separate but interrelated discourses with the political rights of protected speech, Yelp implies a space where activity expands beyond just a mindless form of entertainment. Admittedly, however, there is some irony in Yelp's rhetorical promotion of truth, trust and transparency given the site's systematic refusal to be transparent in its own business practice, particularly as it applies to the website's review filter (see footnote 59) and the lack of disclosure regarding the company's dataveillance program (e.g., the collection and sale of private user data to third-party companies).

[Local] community. A third prominent selling point that reoccurs in Yelp discourse is the promotion of Yelp as a "community." According to the site owners, Yelp is "driven by a strong community of members. The community is an important and integral part of who Yelp is as a company" and central to the user experience (Yelp! Inc., 2005c). As such, Yelp differs from traditional word-of-mouth "by fostering a vibrant community of locals who feel connected both on Yelp and, gasp, in the real world" (Yelp FAQ, 2010). Yelp is thus not simply a functional local city guide but "a terrific community builder" made up of a social group of savvy consumers who are passionate about local businesses and services (Haberkorn, 2006).

A sense of community belonging, therefore, is not just a marketing tool or incentive to join the site but lies at the core of the site's stated mission and purpose. According to press documents, Yelp executives strategically focused on building its community of reviewers for the first several years before attempting to monetize content through advertising. In other words, building the Yelp community and encouraging a sense of belonging took precedent so that users would feel obligated to write honest, thorough and frequent reviews (since without reviews, the site is not only useless but cannot be monetized). The establishment of the Yelp Elite also aimed

to foster the review community by bridging the online and offline contexts. Through monthly parties and regular get-togethers, Yelp Elites provides the opportunity for locals to bridge two seemingly separate spheres.

Yelp also offers a “Community Blog” where readers can “see what’s going on in other Yelp Communities;” the Community Blog features the “Community Lowdown” which posts weekly reviews of recent Yelp Elite parties and events. The boundaries that make up the Yelp “Community” are a bit unclear, however. On the one hand, the site’s geographically-bound definition of “local” implicitly suggests that the Yelp “Community” varies by the physical *place* in which users reside and write. At other times, Yelp employs the term “community” on the macro-level that aggregates all geographically-defined areas where anyone writing for Yelp would be considered part of the “Yelp Community.” Beyond local and membership, Yelp’s promotional discourse describes its community as “funny, useful and cool,” which are also the three descriptors that users can select when rating reviews written by other Yelpers. Community members have also been called “trendsetters and influencers” who are “passionate” and “eager” to share their expertise about their local scene (Yelp! Inc., 2006; Yelp Official Blog, 2011). Beyond that, the term “community” is thrown around without much specificity other than its suggestion of avid consumers who share a taste for experiencing new and exciting things.

Consumer bias. One of Yelp’s biggest public relations “problems” is also the company’s main selling point – that the site offers consumers a space to write “honest and unbiased” reviews based on their own local experiences. As a “completely member-driven” resource, negative and potentially [economically] damaging reviews written by consumers are defended by the site as rigorously as the right to praise a local business. Since inception, the site has promoted itself as pro-consumer resource that wholly supports its writers: “Business owners want to

control their reputation, and we're just not going to let that happen," according to Stoppelman who reports that his top priority is "to make sure the community is protected and can share without fear of being publicly spat on" (Miller, 2009b, para 11). Elsewhere, Stoppelman reiterates the company's pro-consumer stance by stating: "We put the community first, the consumer second and businesses third" (Hansell, 2008) in spite of the fact that "there will always be tension between Yelp and business owners because consumers are creating the content, which is inherently unpredictable" (Richards, 2009).

Despite this unpredictability, Yelp frequently boasts that it rarely removes reviews, even when the site's own advertisers complain; instead, the company prefers "to let the crowd have its say" (Fost, 2008). Prioritizing consumer freedom and its "consumer-centric" model over the site's own advertisers (at least in its public discourse) is explained by Stoppelman as a matter of integrity: "We can't referee factual disputes. Why believe the business owner who has skin in the game?" (Miller, 2009b). Stoppelman takes this even further to suggest that businesses are more prone to be censored than consumers: "To protect the voice of the consumer, the voices of businesses, many of which advertise on the site, had to be muted" (Miller). Above all, therefore, Yelp privileges the consumer's right to produce reviews about local businesses, even those that advertise with the site. Therefore, despite widespread criticism from local businesses and the media alleging a bias against business, Yelp has unswervingly defended itself as a consumer-centric resource.⁶¹

⁶¹ While Yelp consistently defends its site as a pro-consumer resource, Stoppelman has also tried to quell some criticism about its perceived bias against businesses by pointing out the site's overall ratings: "Yelp is not about 'drive-by reviewing,' where a new user would fire off one angry rant about a place and then move on. If anything, many of the reviews tend toward the positive, with some 85 percent of businesses reviewed on Yelp having ratings of three out of five stars or above. Yelp is not a place where people get screwed" (Sutel, 2007).

Conclusion: Yelp as Prosumption

It seems quite clear from an analysis of Yelp's promotional discourse that the site promotes itself as a space that relies on the bottom-up participation of an active consumer base, a characteristic consistent with the techno-utopian, cyber-libertarian approach to prosumption or participatory consumption (Jenkins, 2006; Toffler, 1980). What makes Yelp trustworthy and thus *useful* is the fact that consumers are not reading paid reviews or advertorials masked as something more authentic, but rather unpaid and experience-based consumer-generated content that is published without restriction. By usurping the longstanding "pay to play" environment that favored corporate businesses or multi-national chains, Yelp levels the playing field for small local businesses while giving voice to local consumers. Even in the face of criminal allegations and negative press, Yelp continues to defend its mission of protecting consumer rights with a rhetoric typically reserved for proclamations of citizenship.

As a result, Yelp's promotional discourse effectively politicizes the act of consumer reviewing by invoking what Papacharissi (2010) refers to as the "mystical connection between technology and democracy" that trigger a "narrative of emancipation, autonomy, and freedom in the public imagination" (p. 2-3). While in actuality not all new technologies are democratizing, they conjure a familiar promise nonetheless. Yelp is no different; as demonstrated, the company promotes its product (the website) as a *pro-consumer*, user-centric *community* that shifts power back into the hands of the everyday consumer through the open sharing of *true*, *trustworthy* and *transparent* information. In doing so, Yelp appropriates a narrative of democracy to promote *prosumption* as a quasi-political process that is usurping the monopoly power held by an elite professional class (e.g., professional critics, journalists, advertisers) and business owners (e.g., those who have traditionally owned the means of production). Intended or not, the site

discursively constructs the activity of consumer reviewing as both productive and democratizing; through “Real People, Real Reviews” Yelp effectively “democratizes the reputation of a business. Rather than a single arbiter of taste, it’s hundreds of people saying whether they like this business or not,” according to CEO Stoppelman (Sutel, 2007, para 7). The fact that Yelp prohibits business owners from becoming Yelp Elite or posting their own reviews merely underscores Yelp’s pro-consumer stance.

In many ways, Yelp implies a relationship between consumers and citizens without explicitly stating as such. Their defense of consumer power suggests a belief that the act of reviewing has consequences and can thus facilitate some form of change be it better business practices, better customer service, better community relations or the elevation of local businesses over cookie-cutter multi-national chains that have long dominated most economies. As demonstrated, Yelp rhetorically sides with the community of consumers in its promotional discourse. The company defends the “right to speak” at any cost, despite the fact that Yelp simultaneously relies on these very businesses for profit – many of which have publicly expressed their discontent with Yelp in the press or lawsuits. If Yelp’s democratizing rhetoric echoes a legacy of false narratives as Papacharissi (2010) points out, then how much freedom does Yelp give consumers in practice? What space are consumers granted to engage in “free speech” about businesses and services within their local communities? What type of language or participation is enabled by the site’s architectural features, cues, options and design, and what types of behaviors are structurally constrained?

To address the degree to which “talk” meets “action,” the following section turns towards Yelp’s structures of participation to examine what type of prosumption is enabled through Yelp’s site design. To what extent does the site’s online architecture enable or constrain prosumption

and the potential for consumer-citizenship? How is the site's use influenced, if at all, by its virtual geography? Critical discourse analysis is employed here to explore how Yelp's business model and architectural options function as a space for prosumption and consumer-citizenship to emerge.

Findings (Part 2)

Structuring Participation: Architecture and Social Space

An analysis of Yelp's architecture and business model demonstrates that Yelp's structures of participation do not always deliver in the ways it has promised. Of particular concern for this chapter is the way that the site's business model and architectural features tend to encourage participation towards specific, desired ends. While Yelp rhetorically promotes itself as a community, the space in which actual community formation occurs is in many ways relegated to the "backstage" of Yelp's primary feature (i.e., content) or in venues that are located in an offline space; the Yelp "community" does not visibly appear front and center. Yelp also offers a limited capacity for directly engaging with consumer-generated reviews yet offers business owners the opportunity to publicly respond. Additionally, while Yelp promises unprecedented consumer power, there are structural limitations with what consumers can actually do with their power.

The following section will demonstrate two things: One, while Yelp rhetorically promotes itself as a macro-community made up of individually "local" communities, it structurally offers limited modes for engaging in public, productive talk; in particular, the opportunities for engaging one another around the site's most important feature – its content – are delimited by the site's more recent obligations to business owners. Two, the site's business

model, architectural features and thus modes of communicating⁶² encourages a consumption-oriented discourse that somewhat delimits the political possibilities of Yelping, such as the use of Yelp as a space as a form of consumer-citizenship.⁶³

Modes of communicating. Despite its promise of and orientation towards “community,” Yelp offers a limited number of options for productive, two-way “talk” to occur about local businesses and services. In particular, the most visible and important section to Yelp - its consumer-generated reviews - are based largely on a one-way mode of communication. In the case of reviews, users are unable to directly respond to, or comment on, the posted reviews in a way that is visible to other people (e.g., unregistered members, lurkers) using the site. Business owners with a verified user account are the only parties able to publicly comment on posted reviews. Users who might want to engage another Yelper about one of their posted reviews must either send a personal email message – and thus keep the conversation private - or send a “complement” that other users can view upon approval by the user.

Complements. Although the complement feature is designed to encourage participation and dialogue, it limits conversation to a one-way, asynchronous mode of communication. While the second party is invited to “respond” to the first through another Complement, the conversation does not appear linearly on both profiles. Users can only see the Complements issued to one person by another, not the entire conversation at once. Yelp architecturally

⁶² While it is easier to think of Yelp’s “modes of communication” as separate from the site’s architectural structure, this is not entirely accurate. Ways of communicating on Yelp – for example, private messages, Complements, Talk threads – should not be thought of as separate from the site’s architecture as they are medium characteristic of the site (and thusly, part of the site’s architecture).

⁶³ It is important to note that the various components that make up Yelp as a social space – including architecture, business model and aesthetics – are not always mutually exclusive formations in practice. Similarly, it would be erroneous to suggest that Yelp’s pro-consumptive discourse and community displacement are products of the site’s business model or architectural features alone; rather, it makes more sense to see them as mutually constituted formations that simultaneously inform and derive from one another.

aggregates these bits of dialogue on a separate “Complements” page which is located in a subsection of the user’s profile; in other words, Complements that might take place about a certain business do not appear on the business review itself. The only way to then read dialogue produced about a particular business is to read through an individual’s “Complements” pages which, depending on a user’s level of Yelp activity, can number in the thousands.

In addition to delimiting two-way modes of dialogue around business reviews, Complements also encourage a certain *type* of participation. Specifically, Complements linguistically circumscribe positive and “tasteful” forms of self-presentation over rhetorical criticism and in this sense, dissuade users from asking questions about a review, offering counter-perspectives or other forms of criticism. The type of Complements users can send to other reviewers merely reinforces this point. For example, a user must select from a pre-determined list of Complement types (each with its own distinct icon) that contain “witty,” pre-scripted text. To publicly communicate directly with others about a review, users must select from the following available Complements: *Thank You*; *Good Writer*; *Just a Note*; *Write More*; *Great Photo*; *You’re Funny*; *Cute Pic*; *Hot Stuff*; *Like Your Profile*; *You’re Cool* or *Great Lists*. Of these available Complements, the only option that makes sense for critique is *Just a Note*, which is also the only Complement without pre-scripted text. Examples of pre-scripted text include, “Like a strip of bacon frying over an open fire, you’re seriously sizzling” for the Complement option *Hot Stuff*; the Complement *Great Photo* attaches the line, “Nice photos Leibovitz. Keep shooting!” while *Write More* states:

I know you must have a lot of other commitments and social activities that take away time from your Yelp reviews but I can’t take it anymore...you have to write another

review. It's like coffee in the morning and I've started getting headaches from your absence so please think of the little guys and prioritize!

It is important to note that the pre-scripted complements can be edited and replaced with original commentary; however, the categories and existing complement text cue users to approach the task of “Complementing” as a positive and reinforcing activity. It does not suggest behavior that might critically engage reviewers about the content they produced (such as challenging the truthfulness, their approach to reviewing, their perception of the local, etc.). If anything, the feature limits use to a form of positive reinforcement designed to elicit the production of more content from other users. There is, of course, something to be said for civility and positive reinforcement; however, it is important to ask what implications are for the possibilities that presumption makes available when the opportunity for public two-way dialogue is limited. By structuring accessibility and the aesthetics of dialogue in this way, Yelp ultimately delimits productive talk by instead promoting user *productivity*. The fact that business owners themselves are the only parties able to publicly post direct responses to user reviews *within* the actual review itself only further reinforces this problem (this latter point will be discussed below in more detail).

Yelp Talk. While the site fancies itself as a social network, its actual communicative “networking” capabilities are largely limited to the site’s “Talk” feature, a group forum where users can asynchronously post and respond to “threads” started by any Yelp user or business owner. It is notable, however, that the Talk forum is architecturally obscured by its placement on the site and is thus “buried” as a Yelp backchannel of sorts. For example, while a link to the linguistically ambiguous “Talk” feature is displayed at the top of Yelp’s homepage, it appears as the *last* option amongst a series of other functions; the link is also situated at the end of the

toolbar so that it appears directly under the more prominent and distracting “Search” box.⁶⁴

Furthermore, the Talk backchannel is not available in every local community; users from rural or suburban communities are often re-directed to a proximate city or a blank template. Yelp Talk threads are also open to anyone registered as a Yelp user, including business owners (the latter cannot, however, use their business owner user ID so must register and login as a regular user). Conversation occurs in asynchronous, static discussion boards that must be refreshed to update; there are no real-time or immediate conversations, and no instant messaging feature towards this end, either. Threads close after two months of inactivity, but remain visible for reading.

UFCs. As another “complementing” feature, Yelp offers a second way that allows users to engage in the reviews of others except this option is completely anonymous. This feature is what Yelp calls its “UFC” tool, or *Useful, Funny* and *Cool*. Each review posted to Yelp can be rated by any member – registered or unregistered – as *Useful, Funny* and/or *Cool*. These UFC designations appear at the bottom of each review; the total number of UFCs are then tallied at the top of each member’s user profile for others to see just how useful, funny or cool a particular member rates. As an anonymous and closed form of communication, UFCs encourage users into a “collecting” mode in the way they are similarly encouraged to collect the comparatively more open (but still relatively closed) Yelp Complements.

The UFC designation is interesting less on an architectural level than on a linguistic level, but it seems significant to include it here as an example of how Yelp structures participation in certain directions. Specifically, if one “reward” for the production of reviews is the collection of “UFCs,” this suggests that the process of writing reviews ought to be structured around these designations. Like the Complements feature, UFCs serve to encourage productivity from users who collect these virtual accolades. (The degree to which users recognize this prompt and then

⁶⁴ A number of interviewees noted they did not realize Yelp had a Talk feature until long after they joined the site.

actually produce “Useful,” “Funny” and “Cool” reviews will be discussed in the next chapter). The point to be underscored in this section, however, is that UFCs reinforce a one-way mode of [anonymous] communication that structures interaction, and thus community-building, in apolitical ways. It also encourages readers to think about the reviews of others in a limited way – as useful, funny or cool – while encouraging an anonymous (and not very transparent) “vote” on the type of discourse is deemed most relevant. Most importantly, UFCs promote a one-way mode of communicating that ultimately detracts, if not discourages, critical discourse or productive talk while encouraging positive self-presentation and the individualistic task of accumulating positive reinforcement. Productive and collaborative discourse, on the other hand, takes place backstage via Yelp’s Talk feature, or offline at events scheduled for Yelp Elite or by members themselves.

Structuring a pro-consumption bias. On a second level, the architectural and lexical features of Yelp’s online environment discursively construct a social space biased towards *consumption*, not citizenship (and thus consumer-citizenship). In the same vein, Yelp also discursively constructs the local along similar lines in that the concept of the “local” is depoliticized as little more than a geographic boundary. This analysis reveals “Yelping” as an activity predominantly structured within a consumption-oriented discourse of businesses and services located within one’s geographical community, yet without any direct reference to, or politicization of, the *local* as a potentially political construct. On Yelp, “local” is discursively structured as *location*. Whatever possibilities exist for the activity of consumer reviewing to be utilized as a political or civic platform is largely undermined by what structures of participation and aesthetics the site makes available. Through a number of site features, Yelp discursively constructs not only the local but consumer-reviewing in general within a discourse of consumption, limiting the range of possibilities that might also acknowledge a discourse of

production, civic or public identities (i.e., consumer-citizenship). While this analysis does not argue that Yelp's promotional discourse or architecture *determines* how participants use the site, it is clear that the ways in which users interact have effectively been shaped or guided in specific directions.⁶⁵ The architectural features discussed below include Yelp's homepage, user profiles, categories and review guidelines.

Homepage. Users are introduced to Yelp's pro-consumption orientation at the website's homepage, www.yelp.com.⁶⁶ Here, the first feature encountered by users is the "Best of Yelp" box, a shortcut local resource guide prominently displayed in the center of the page. The "Best of Yelp" guide displays the names and links to some of the top-rated local businesses from the user's city across four distinct categories: *Restaurants*, *Shopping*, *Nightlife*, *Beauty and Spas*. Links to all of Yelp's 22 searchable categories then appear in a vertical list to the right of this center display, ordered by the number of reviews written in each category (categories containing zero reviews are not listed).⁶⁷ It is significant that Yelp's site design strategically promotes these four categories, front and center, over 18 other possibilities. The prominent display of "Restaurants," "Shopping" (e.g., malls, shopping centers, boutiques), "Nightlife" (e.g., clubs, bars) and "Beauty and Spas" (e.g., hair and nail salons, massage parlors) suggests to new users

⁶⁵ It could be argued, of course, that consumption-oriented reviewers on Yelp are a self-selecting population that arrive at the site with this expectation and desire to engage in specific taste cultures and a consumer ideology, or are not interested in localism or consumer-citizenship in any real way. This is likely true for some. Interviews showed, however, that many of the site's more politicized subjects had been censored by the site at some point, typically around certain citizen-consumer or production-oriented issues. Thus, even where the desire exists, Yelp's terms of service do not always allow such discussions to occur.

⁶⁶ For new users, the default city is San Francisco, CA, the home of Yelp Headquarters.

⁶⁷ For example, no one in State College, PA (a town of approximately 40,000 permanent residents) has reviewed a business falling under the "Mass Media" category, despite the 37 business listed under this category in a manual search. As a result, the category "Mass Media" does not appear on the Yelp State College homepage, an absence that then reinforces the initial perception of Yelp as a site for private highly consumable (e.g., food and entertainment) services.

that Yelp is a space for connecting with businesses that offer a certain type of product consumption.⁶⁸

By promoting itself as a resource for private, consumption-oriented activities rather than public, civic-oriented services, Yelp also discursively constructs the “local” in particular ways. Local is immediately limited to a strictly geographical construct rather than more fluid, social and political boundaries that might include community or civic relations. For example, imagine how differently both Yelp and the “local” would seem if the featured categories under “Best of Yelp” were *Mass Media*, *Local Services*, *Public Services and Government* and *Religious Organizations* (which arguably, are equally if not more central to a local community than *Restaurants*, *Shopping*, *Nightlife* and *Beauty and Spas*). While the featured categories on the site’s homepage may not directly affect how Yelpers ultimately *use* the site, highlighting these four categories certainly cues users to hold expectations regarding Yelp’s priorities and atmosphere of engagement. Even before entering the site, therefore, users are prompted to see Yelp as a website designed for participating in and reviewing highly consumable services. Yelp’s homepage actively promotes consumption, not citizenship.

Talk categories. The categories available for users on Yelp’s “Talk” feature contributes to this fetishization of commodities that situates the local as a site of physical, affective and/or conspicuous consumption rather than a practice bound with other civic or public-oriented experiences. Before beginning a new post on Talk, users must choose from a category under which they want the post to appear which can be selected from the following options: *Local Questions and Answers*; *Events*; *Food*; *Shopping and Products*; *Travel*; *Relationships and Dating*; *Humor & Offbeat*; *Entertainment and Pop Culture*; *Sports*; *News and Politics*; *Family*

⁶⁸ Not to mention, consumption targeted to a specific social class.

and Parenting; Yelper Shout-Outs; Site Questions and Answers; Other. With one or two exceptions, the Talk categories serve as conversational prompts about entertainment and fun (e.g., *Shopping, Travel, Relationships, Humor, Entertainment, Sports*) over topics that might bridge consumption with more “local” political and civic conversations (e.g., *News & Politics, Local Questions and Answers*). As a result, this promotes the perception that Yelp is a space that first and foremost prefers the discussion of consumption-based activities. In terms of defining the “local” on Yelp, it is also noteworthy that *Local Questions and Answers* is the only explicitly “local” designation for a site dedicated to empowering consumers with information about their geographic community.

User profiles. Like other social networking and Web 2.0 sites, a central feature of Yelp is the user profile. As a form of self-presentation, profiles work to secure connections between individuals by providing cues or “signals” of one’s identity and are thus central to fostering social interaction online (boyd & Heer, 2006; Papacharissi, 2009). Profiles thus “cue” other users for the purpose of gauging the degree of credibility or reliability of information posted by another person to the site (Papacharissi).⁶⁹ In the same respect, the architecture of a site’s profile template (e.g., the open or closed nature of the questions asked) *suggests* particular ways of behaving, self-presenting or being online.⁷⁰

The profile template offered by Yelp limits the amount of personal information disclosure to information more telling of an individual’s alignment within particular taste cultures or *habitus* than anything else (Bourdieu, 1986). Architecturally, therefore, Yelp offers a profile

⁶⁹ In a comparative analysis of three social networking sites, Papacharissi (2009) demonstrates that the architectural differences between the sites can impact the degree to which users disclose personal information since the act of disclosure serves different purposes “depending on the architecture and orientation of an online social network” (p. 203).

⁷⁰ Papacharissi also notes that the degree to which users subvert the intended profile or content guidelines in ways that are unanticipated by site owners can be partially determined by how open or closed the site’s architecture is.

template that suggests the self-presentation of consumer, not citizen, identities. Of the site's profile questions, there are three pertaining to geographical location (*My Hometown*, *Location* and the slightly more open and ambiguous *Find Me In* ____); the remaining questions have little to do with localism or citizenship in any significant way: *My Blog or Website*; *When I'm not Yelping* ____; *Why You Should Read My Reviews*; *My Second Favorite Website*; *The Last Great Book I Read*; *My First Concert*; *My Favorite Movie*; *My Last Meal on Earth*; *Don't Tell Anyone Else, But* ____; *Most Recent Discovery*; and *Current Crush*. If user profiles are designed to make a user appear more transparent and, by default, trustworthy, it is notable that trust on Yelp is built through the presentation of one's preferences for cultural goods over other characteristics. Credibility on Yelp is established not so much by a member's relationship to or presence within his or her local [offline] community, but by the taste cultures conveyed through one's display of favorite books, movies, websites and music. Basic questions that convey more traditional forms of identity and citizenship that even appear on other social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace), such as occupation, religious and political affiliation, are altogether absent on Yelp.

Review guidelines. The range of content production and self-presentation across social networking, consumer-review and other "prosumption sites" can vary according to the degree of architectural openness enabled by the site's design. On Yelp, the open or closed nature of the site's architecture varies by feature; while the ability to communicate around or through reviews is architecturally closed, the space in which users write and publish reviews is comparatively open. Theoretically, this openness provides users the ability to create discourse about their local business and service community without restriction, enabling prosumers to potentially use the site in unintended ways.

As noted elsewhere, members have the opportunity to review any existing business or service; meaning, the smallest of restaurants to the largest hotels to public bus lines, museums and radio stations are equally subject to critique. There is no limit on how little or how much users can write; entries range anywhere from one sentence to several paragraphs long. To write a review, members must be logged on to their profiles so each review is connected to the person who wrote it; it is not possible to post an anonymous review on Yelp, thus heightening the site's transparency and, by default, credibility. One preliminary condition for writing a review requires that users first rate the business on a one-to-five star scale; the actual space then allotted for writing the review itself is a blank box without word limit (the box also allows users to spell-check before publishing). Other than that, users are not required to fill out any specific form questions or other restrictive template to publish a review.

However, while Yelp does not structure reviews to be written according to a specific format, the site's Terms of Service *does* include a list of things that users *cannot* include in their reviews.⁷¹ Amongst Yelp's "Review Guidelines," the company requires "Relevance" stating, "Reviews aren't the place for rants about a business's employment practices, political ideologies, or other matters that don't address the core of the normal customer experience" (Yelp Review Guidelines, 2009).⁷² While this rule may seem reasonable for the site to function properly as a useful local resource, Yelp's review guideline essentially reifies the "normal customer experience" within a particular discourse of consumer ideology. Here, the normal customer experience is understood, without room for exception, as a purely personal and transactional

⁷¹ Access to this list, however, is not prominently displayed anywhere on Yelp and users must seek it out in order to learn exactly what these restrictions are. Most of the people interviewed did not express an awareness of these restrictions, yet most seemed to follow them intuitively or by discovery via trial and error.

⁷² The remaining Review Guidelines include a number of speech restrictions on hate speech, bigotry and lewdness as well as another rule against plagiarizing the reviews of others. The review guidelines also ask users to refrain from writing about businesses in which a past or present conflict of interest may exist, or from writing on second-hand experiences or hearsay (i.e., "reviews must be personally experienced").

experience. This single guideline intensifies the tendency to fetishize commodities on Yelp by preventing other discursive formations, such as consumer-citizenship, from entering the conversation.

Yelp's Review Guidelines, however, are not mere suggestions but rules. It is worthwhile to note on this point that reviews violating guidelines are permanently *removed* from Yelp altogether, which is a much different treatment than a *filtered* review. Meaning, reviews that veer from an ideology of consumption are subject to a harsher form of sanctioning than the filtered reviews of corporate shills, competitors or those written by business owners themselves. Deleted reviews are permanently destroyed while filtered reviews are still publicly accessible by entering a password through a CAPTCHA key generator at the bottom of each business listing. Filtered reviews are also still visible to the user who wrote them and may at times be "unfiltered" by Yelp's algorithm and again re-appear under the business listing. In other words, reviews that violate Yelp's Review Guidelines are punished more severely than reviews that in many instances are false, malicious, or pose some conflict of interest.

Local Business Relations. Yelp claims it "democratizes" the review process by providing a space in which hundreds of people can comment on a business, rather than forcing consumers to rely on a single (and usually elite) arbiter of taste such as the professional food critic or marketer. What this critical discourse analysis has aimed to so far demonstrate, however, is that Yelp has structured activity in a way that does not necessary give consumers power over businesses as promised in its promotional rhetoric. Over the past few years, Yelp has increasingly attended to the needs of local businesses while the company's relationship to consumers has stabilized. As part of the company's evolving business model Yelp created the "Yelp for Business Owners," a program exclusive for the use of local business owners that offers

a number of features inaccessible to non-business owning Yelpers. In many ways, this accessibility to Yelp's consumer-centric platform has given the "old guard" a new means of reclaiming "power" supposedly lost to the presumption process. While these considerations may also be an attempt at leveraging the playing field or being fair, Yelp for Business Owners provides local businesses with the tools to help manage their reputations – a purpose that is antithetical to Yelp's consumer-centric goals. However, before the implications of Yelp for Business Owners on the site's promise of consumer freedom and power can be understood, it is necessary to give a brief history of its development.

In the company's first few years in operation, local business owners who did not pay to advertise on Yelp had relatively no control or recourse over reviews and content posted by users on company business pages or in the Talk threads. Non-advertising business owners had no ability to publicly *or* privately respond to users, nor could they opt out of having their business listed on the site.⁷³ In other words, business owners had no rights on Yelp unless they paid money to advertise. As Yelp grew in popularity, local businesses increasingly frustrated by Yelp's pro-consumer approach began suing the company with class action lawsuits for libel and extortion. Through the popular press, business owners openly and publicly challenged the integrity of Yelp reviews, claiming powerlessness against libel or false information that users were publishing about their businesses. Much of the discontent, therefore, stemmed from a growing sense of powerlessness in the face of negative reviews which only intensified as Yelp became more popular.

By 2008, three class-action lawsuits were filed against Yelp accusing the company of extortion for its advertising practices. The popular press, trade publications and tech blogs

⁷³ That is, unless the business owner opened a personal account on Yelp and contacted users through the site's private messaging feature available to all Yelp users.

heavily covered the backlash from angry business owners; articles frequently noted a common accusation that Yelp filtered positive reviews for businesses that refused to advertise with the company. A particularly damning feature story by the San Francisco weekly *East Bay Express* published in 2010 accused Yelp of extortion after interviewing a number of local business owners who claimed the company had long employed threats and aggressive sales tactics to sell ad space. While this piece was not the first to make extortion claims against Yelp public, its publication in Yelp's hometown of San Francisco incited a plethora of negative follow-up press that continues to reference the *East Bay* article today.

As a way of managing this crisis, Yelp began unrolling a number of tools, features and programs for business owners in 2008; the tools strategically brought business owners into the fold of consumer reviewing- a space from which they were once prohibited. On the surface, the move can be understood as a form of public relations aimed at deflecting the increasingly popular opinion that Yelp is hostile and economically damaging to local business owners.⁷⁴ It is also possible that the shift occurred from demands placed by two new members added to Yelp's board of directors upon new rounds of private equity funding. Regardless of the exact reason, Yelp's business-friendly shift required a number of structural and design changes that suggests (or clarifies) Yelp's priorities and commercial objectives as perhaps less consumer-centric that it promotes.

⁷⁴ In the same way Yelp users might find ways to resist the site's architectural limitations and recommendations, many local business owners who have felt powerless against Yelp have also engaged in their own form of retaliation against the site's consumer-generated reviews. While a full treatment of this resistance is outside the scope of this paper, it is notable that many business owners have responded to Yelp in this way rather than acquiescing to advertising packages and/or consumer demands.

Yelp for Business Owners. Yelp officially launched the first of several pro-business initiatives shortly after three class-action lawsuits were filed against the company in March 2008. “Yelp for Business Owners” is a suite of free tools that allows verified business owners or managers to manage their Yelp business page and profile. Through the free version, business owners now have the ability to add relevant information about their business, upload photographs and offer promotional deals and coupons. Each page contains a space entitled “About This Business” where owners can edit their profile and contact information, highlight business specialties, provide a short history, personally introduce the manager or owner and recommend up to five other related or “preferred” local businesses. Business owners who have claimed their Yelp page can also privately message or publicly respond to users who have reviewed the business. Automatic email alerts are sent to registered owners to their inbox when a new review has been posted to the business’s page by a Yelp user, which allows them to instantly respond or quickly manage crises as they arise. Additionally, business owners that claim their Yelp account are automatically enrolled to receive weekly emails that can include traffic analysis (e.g., page views) and advice on how to harness the available free tools for maximum effect. Business owners are encouraged to embed their own analytics into their pages in order to keep track of audience behavior, such as which sites users had visited prior to their page.⁷⁵

Local business outreach. Shortly after introducing Yelp for Business Owners the company hired a Local Business Outreach Manager in March 2009 to manage Yelp’s relationships with small businesses. The Local Business Outreach Manager’s sole job is to

⁷⁵ Businesses that advertise with Yelp pay for search engine marketing (i.e., for their results to appear first, like Google), as well as ad placement on competitors pages, video, etc.

“educate” the business community on how Yelp works which occurs through monthly town hall style meetings with local businesses. Similar presentations are also regularly given to local Chambers of Commerce, restaurant and retail associations in metropolitan areas about how businesses can harness Yelp’s free tools towards productive ends. Additionally, the Outreach Manager organizes free monthly webinars that offer similar presentations that any registered local business owner in the world can virtually attend. In 2010, Yelp’s Local Business Outreach Manager helped launch the “Yelp Small Business Advisory Council,” a group of 25 select local business owners from around the country that serve as “small business advisors” to Yelp. Through monthly teleconferences with Yelp executives, the Small Business Advisory Council discusses Yelp-related product development while providing Yelp management “with input and guidance regarding the concerns of small business owners” (Lowe, 2010, para 1).

In addition to the site’s business model and organization that supports local businesses as much – if not more so – than prosumers themselves, Yelp also takes a pro-business orientation from an architectural standpoint. For example, it is significant that the distinct features and affordances afforded by Yelp for Business Owners are unavailable to Yelp reviewers themselves. In many ways, Yelp for Business Owners is structured as its own separate site that operates outside of Yelp; architecturally, the site exists under a separate URL log-in (<https://biz.yelp.com/>) from that of the main Yelp page where users access their accounts (<https://www.yelp.com/login>). Much of the content available to business owners here is unavailable to Yelp users as well, such as traffic analysis, page statistics and other analytical data. Between the distinct URL, log-in, features, affordances and updates, Yelp for Business Owners is symbolically structured as its own separate “site” from which consumer-reviewers are shut out; it is a space that gives business owners the opportunity to manage their brand identity

by producing their own content and privately or publicly responding to reviews at their discretion. While Business Owners cannot log into the “other Yelp” with their business owner account, they may create a standard reviewer log-in as a user; with both options, business owners have more opportunities to traverse the site (including Yelp Talk) and create content than the ordinary Yelp reviewer. In conjunction with the other pro-business opportunities Yelp offers, it would appear then that business owners on Yelp are given far more resources to manage their online reputations than its promotional discourse indicates.

Another architectural feature that appears to favor business over consumers is Yelp’s relatively closed communication network. Although Yelp rhetorically promotes transparency and accountability, the site does not enable users to openly discuss, respond to or critique business reviews within the space of the business listing as previously mentioned. Yelp users cannot publicly respond to posted reviews within the review listing unlike registered business owners, who can directly respond to reviews about their business available for any user to read. In other words, Yelp affords business owners the right to engage in a publicly accessible, two-way, asynchronous mode of communication within the review space itself. Admittedly, while restricting the ability for Yelp reviewers to publicly interact with each and every review certainly has its benefits (e.g., it prevents spamming, verbal attacks, irrelevant posts, trolls or “stealth” advertising), limiting this right to business owners ultimately privileges a single, authoritative voice. Only by triangulating this content with the reviews of other users can a consumer make a decision about the trustworthiness of any one business experience. It becomes easier for readers to then view a business owner’s public refute of a consumer’s experience than to read through the rest of that business’s Yelp reviews for similar accounts before making an informed decision (especially for businesses that have hundreds of reviews). Although it is always possible that a

public response might backfire for a business that responds poorly, the point here is that Yelp's site architecture enables business owners additional communicative options for engagement than are granted to consumer-reviewers themselves.⁷⁶

While businesses have much of the same rights as users, and in some ways more, they are also subject to some discrepancies that are arguably more favorable to Yelp users. For one, unlike the average user businesses cannot remove their name or profile from Yelp because it is considered protected speech (as are the reviews about the business). Therefore, businesses cannot chose to "opt out" of Yelp if they so desire. Users on the other hand are able to cancel their accounts at any time, although their content remains on Yelp for public viewing. Users have the ability to remove their name and profile information so that they are less identifiable. So at the very least, consumers are ultimately able to abandon Yelp in a way that business owners cannot.

Community managers. Yelp's organizational model includes numerous initiatives designed to maintain regular communication and relationships with local business owners. In addition to an official Yelp blog and Twitter account utilized for business communication (Miller, 2009a), Yelp employs Community Managers ("CMs") to reside in major metropolitan cities and act as liaisons between local Yelpers, business owners and company headquarters in San Francisco. As paid employees for Yelp, CMs maintain good business relationships, arrange advertising and promotional packages with local businesses, manage street marketing, publish weekly email newsletters, and organize monthly parties for Yelp Elite members; CMs also locate and secure contracts with the local businesses that will ultimately sponsor these monthly Yelp

⁷⁶ Reviewers can comment on the reviews of others through the site's "Complement" feature, but these do not appear amongst the business listing's reviews (instead, Complements are aggregated on a subpage within the user's profile). Meaning, users can find a way around this by describing someone else's review in their post, but this is often difficult and confusing to navigate since reviews are not necessarily ordered by publication date (in other words, readers must then search for the review amongst the myriad of others posted to a particular business page)

Elite parties.⁷⁷ It is important to note, however, that the Community Manager not only helps facilitate local community relations between prosumers, businesses and Yelp headquarters but to assist in *manufacturing* the Yelp community, as well. For example, in addition to the duties already listed, Community Managers are also paid to add to the local conversation by writing their own Yelp reviews; CMs also encourage content production from other locals by regularly sending out private messages, complements and invitations to Elite events as a way of incentivizing users to be more active on the site. The Community Manager in Phoenix, Arizona speaks to this point: “When I send a complement, it encourages other people to do the same, and that creates the culture” (Chafkin, 2010, p. 4). Community managers will also join in the “Talk” threads as a “regular” user and actively promote a sense of community cohesion in this way. Community Managers also promote the Yelp brand by creating threads that generate discussion about Yelp itself; for example, CMs regularly use Yelp Talk to re-cap Elite events and to encourage Elite members to post reviews of the monthly parties they have attended which oftentimes includes thanking or making reference to the businesses that hosted the party.

Proprietary rights. Before users can create an account on Yelp they must sign, and agree to abide by, Yelp’s terms of service agreement that outlines ownership rights to content produced for the site. According to Yelp’s terms of service, anyone who produces reviews or other content on the site retains ownership over that content; in other words, users own – and are therefore liable – for their “prosumption.” Prosumers on Yelp, however, do not have *rights* over the content in that they also relinquish control over their prosumption to Yelp once it is published.

⁷⁷ The job description posted to Yelp’s employment page illuminates what type of person the company feels best suits the task of managing a community: “Looking for “the ‘coolest person’ in London. A social chameleon – the ultimate connector; an urban adventurer who can write and throw a party. The ideal candidate...has fire in the belly. Takes no prisoners. In a word: ‘driven’” (Yelp, 2010).

Additionally, consumer-reviewers relinquish their content to the use of Third Parties without any compensation or benefit. As stated in Yelp's Terms of Service (TOS) Agreement:

We may use Your Content in a number of different ways, including publicly displaying it, reformatting it, incorporating it into advertisements and other works, creating derivative works from it, promoting it, distributing it, *and allowing others to do the same in connection with their own websites and media platforms...*As such, you hereby *irrevocably grant us world-wide, non-exclusive, royalty-free, sublicensable, transferable rights to use Your Content for any purpose.* [emphasis added]

Additionally, Yelp's TOS claim ownership over all Yelp Content, or content made available by the company itself. Yelp's TOS policy thus creates an asymmetrical relationship between prosumers and site owners; prosumers are seemingly afforded "ownership" over their content but yet have no rights in determining how that content is used by Yelp. Conversely, prosumers are not free to use the proprietary content produced by Yelp in any form. Yelp's owners thus maintain control over how prosumption is exploited for profit while prohibiting its users from doing the same.

Yelp presumably allows users to retain ownership rights over their content as a loophole that then allows Yelp to escape liability for any legal problems that might arise. In the meantime, Yelp can use consumer-generated content in its advertising campaigns, as blog content, in the press or in other promotional, commercial forms. Additionally, Yelp exploits prosumption in the sale of its reviews to third party websites or search engines that integrate local search capabilities. For example, Yelp reviews are aggregated on Google Places along with consumer reviews from other local listing sites like Citysearch and InsiderPages; similarly, ZipRealty, a national online real estate brokerage, integrates Yelp's consumer reviews into its home sale

listings as a way of virtually showing potential home buyers the proximity (and Yelp ratings) of restaurants, entertainment spots, and other services.⁷⁸ These types of exclusive third-party contracts serve as a form of surplus value for Yelp, arguably exploiting the presumption of Yelpers for profit to which the prosumers themselves do not have access. Thus, the rights relinquished to Yelp by consumer reviewers intensifies the asymmetrical relationship between prosumers and the site's owners that do not necessarily align with the promotional discourse and prosumer theory that privileges "prosumer control."

Conclusion: A Pro-Business Turn?

The Yelp for Business Owners initiative has extended business owners a number of tools and information sources to employ offensive and defensive strategies against the power of consumer reviews. From a strictly economic standpoint, it makes logical sense that Yelp would want to appease the very businesses that help monetize the site's content. Yelp executives justify the new features and outreach initiatives as mutually beneficial to both businesses and consumers. According to Peter Fenton, a member of Yelp's board of directors whose private equity firm funded the company with \$10 million, Yelp "can't neglect the needs of businesses, nor can they be a site where businesses can be abused" (Miller, 2009b, para 6). Yelp's COO Geoff Donaker has echoed Fenton's position claiming, "Business owners for years now have been asking for more and more voice on the site. As long as it's done in a respectable way, it's good for the consumer and good for the business owner" (Miller, para 3). The new measures have also been explained as Yelp's attempt to introduce communication, rather than antagonism,

⁷⁸ The purpose of this feature is to give ZipRealty clients a sense of the neighborhood from residents who already live there. In line with Yelp's own discursive strategies, ZipRealty only offers ratings and reviews for listings that fall under the categories of Restaurants, Nightlife, Arts & Entertainment, Active Life, Home Services, Local Services and Shopping. The site does not show nearby public sector information or businesses or services that fall under the categories: Medical, Education, Mass Media or Government and Public Services.

between businesses and consumers by creating a “positive feedback loop, so local businesses can connect with their most vocal customers in a positive and productive way” (Yelp! Inc., 2008). However, the attempt at leveling the playing field between businesses and consumers raises serious questions about how the site negotiates these compromises as a self-proclaimed “disruptive technology” (Lister, 2010), particularly one that continues to employ a pro-consumer, anti-establishment discourse as its main selling point.

For example, Yelp’s pro-business orientation with Yelp for Business Owners and the company’s retainment of proprietary rights over consumer-generated content creates an asymmetrical relationship between prosumers and site owners that exploits prosumption as surplus value. In addition to the benefits that Yelp for Business Owners provides, the initiatives also force local businesses into a competing prosumer role in which they must constantly monitor their own online reputations through Yelp, producing content which contributes to another level of surplus value for Yelp (in addition to those businesses that pay to advertise on Yelp). Then there is also the issue of “control.” If prosumption theory is about the relinquishing of control, then what should be made of Yelp’s TOS policies that allows for the exploitation of user labor? Exclusive third-party contracts that sell consumer reviews serve as yet another form of surplus value for Yelp, exploiting the prosumption of Yelpers for profit. Thus, the rights relinquished to Yelp by consumer reviewers intensifies the asymmetrical relationship between prosumers and the site’s owners that do not necessarily align with the promotional discourse and prosumer theory that privileges “prosumer control.”

Conclusion: Prosumption as Pro-Consumption

A comparative analysis of Yelp's promotional discourse and the site's structures of participation has demonstrated that what the site promises does not always align with what the site offers. While the company's promotional strategies reproduces narratives of democratization common to disruptive technologies, the site's virtual geography and commercial business model ultimately delimits much of this potential. As revealed, Yelp has slowly but consistently amended its policies – though not necessarily its rhetoric - to appease, if not succumb to, the demands of capital and by default, traditional structures of power (e.g., potential and existing advertisers, business).

Yelp's brand of prosumption purports to usurp the traditional power of marketers, big business and elite taste cultures by letting the collaborative wisdom of local crowds determine what constitutes “good” service, business and tastes. However, just because technology holds the promise of democratization, consumer power, or practice of consumer-citizenship does not necessarily mean that in all cases, such outcomes manifest. After all, Yelp is not a public service; the site is a for-profit business with a bulk of its revenue generated through advertising. Meaning, the site to some degree must appease the very businesses that its consumer-reviewers critique. Thus, despite its promotional rhetoric, Yelp's desire to monetize content via advertising and more positive business relations has consistently comprised the company's ability to make good on its promises. A discourse analysis of the site's business model and architecture illuminated a number of ways in which the guarantee of “total consumer control” over content is compromised by the site's actual structures of participation.

A critical examination of Yelp's aesthetics, content and site structure reveals a set of intended functions and use biased towards the production of a consumption-oriented discourse of

which the “local” becomes inextricably a part. As demonstrated, a number of Yelp’s features and aesthetics, including user profiles and review guidelines, structure a form of commodity fetishism into the review process. For example, while Yelp serves as a resource for businesses and services of all types ranging the private-public service continuum, the site is architecturally structured to promote private and personal forms of consumption (e.g., restaurants, shopping, nightlife and beauty salons). Limiting the range of discourse to ideologies of consumption eliminates a public, civic or production-oriented means of articulating the local as it applies to both commerce and community. This pro-consumption bias is most evidently written into the site’s features and review guidelines which then work to symbolically annihilate discourses of production and [consumer]-citizenship while redefining the ‘local’ within the discourse of consumption-oriented activities.

If discourse is how we make sense of our social worlds, then the words and ideas that are used by Yelp are just as important as the words and ideas that are *not* used. As a form of discourse, Yelp’s promotional campaign and site architecture contain “culturally ingrained and institutionally powerful ways of looking at, experiencing and understanding particular areas of social life” (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 147). Critical discourse analysis thus aims to unveil these ingrained relations of power, authority and status across Yelp. In order to do so, however, it is equally as important to note what language and practices are *present* in Yelp’s discourses as those that are *absent*. By privileging prosumption as a practice biased towards *consumption* over other discursive formations, Yelp thus limits the range of political possibilities that can emerge from this consumer-centric practice. As Deacon et al., note, discourses “deeply permeate what is allowed as legitimate knowledge in particular domains of social life, and rigidly exclude other possibilities and other perspectives on those domains” (p. 147). Thus, as Yelp’s promotional and

architecture privileges discourses of consumption, the site systematically excludes discourses of production and the possibilities for consumer-citizenship.⁷⁹

In practice, Yelp's shift to a business-friendly corporate model that retains proprietary rights over consumer-generated content threatens to compromise Yelp's stated goal of giving power and control to consumers. While these initiatives could be viewed as a response to the demands of local business owners for a more democratic process that gives equal consideration to the voice of businesses as it does for consumers, Yelp has come to serve more as new type of a virtual Chamber of Commerce than a "review democracy." Yelp's decision to take a more business-friendly approach to consumer reviewing also demonstrates a critique of prosumption, particularly in cases where the objective to turn profit is based on the democratization of information and access. Yelp's ad-based model, like most traditional media outlets, relies on some of the very companies that its content criticizes and is thus thrust into a precarious position of navigating the competing interests of advertisers and audiences. Along with paid advertisements, Yelp's business model also depends on private equity financing which adds yet another layer of pressure on the company to maintain good public relations. As noted earlier, extortion allegations, lawsuits and negative press also arrived just as Yelp secured its third and fourth rounds of private investment funding in 2008 that expanded Yelp's board of directors with prominent executives from the Silicon Valley tech industry. The political economy in which Yelp is situated cannot be ignored and demonstrates the limitations of commercially-driven prosumer sites. The structural conditions of Yelp thus illustrate the difficulty of monetizing

⁷⁹ In addition to delimiting the possibilities Yelp affords, consumer ideology as "legitimate knowledge" is particularly significant in the context of the growing local web industry which is positioned to develop as a site of intensified commerce. The application of a consumption-oriented discourse to the local has direct implications for how we begin to construct the social worlds of local communities online and offline within a market-oriented framework.

prosumer labor and also expose some of the inherent contradictions of prosumption in a capitalist economy. Additionally, this chapter contributes to the literature on prosumption and social network sites as it reveals the degree to which business and architectural structures are effectively able to direct participation, self-expression and use in specific, desired ways.

To summarize, this chapter has demonstrated that the promotional and structural features of Yelp cue users to approach prosumption as a form of self-presentation and expression focused on consumption-oriented experiences; thus, prosumers on Yelp are encouraged to approach their local community from a market-oriented perspective over and above other discursive formations of the local. This systematically works to eliminate the potential for Yelp to serve as a space in which consumer-citizenship might emerge. Ultimately, Yelp's structures of participation help to shift power into the hands of consumers inasmuch as this "power" is used in furthering the discourse of consumption.

One of the limitations of this conclusion, however, is that critical discourse analysis does not account for how users themselves participate in the production of information on Yelp. As also noted in this analysis, Yelp offers a number of open features that allow prosumers to transcend the structural and discursive barriers around the site's potential for consumer-citizenship. Therefore, it is important to assess the degree to which users either accommodate or resist this agenda. It is quite possible, for instance, that Yelpers regularly utilize the site for purposes unintended by the site's owners. The following chapter will address this point, and offer a textual analysis of consumer-generated content as a way of understanding the degree to which prosumers transcend or conform to Yelp's structures of participation.

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Chapter Four

Prosuming the Local:

An Analysis of Yelp's Consumer Reviews

The previous chapter analyzed Yelp's promotional discourse to understand how the company discursively constructs itself as a community of practice that reinforces many of the rhetorical claims to consumer empowerment theoretically associated with "prosumption" (Toffler, 1980). By comparing and contrasting these rhetorical claims with Yelp's architectures of participation, I have argued that the site places structural limitations on the range of consumer empowerment it enables. Specifically, Yelp limits the site's potential to serve as a communicative space for engaging in the politics of consumption.

Having argued that Yelp structures participation towards consumerist ends, it now makes sense to turn towards an analysis of the site's consumer-generated content in order to see how users engage or resist the structural limitations placed by the site's infrastructure and technosocial affordances. Specifically, how do users navigate Yelp's architecture and ideological bias to reinforce or transcend the site's consumerist orientation? This chapter offers a critical discourse analysis of Yelp reviews to examine how users conform to, or deviate from, available templates and adjust their behavior to reject or accommodate to these imposed "coordinates" (Arvidsson, 2006). On one level this chapter critically examines how prosumers use online social spaces for expressions of consumer-citizenship as it specifically relates to their local communities. On another, this analysis lends legitimacy to Internet research that deals more generally with issues of brand management, web architecture and contested relationships between structure and agency.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Yelp has structured participation to privilege a certain (consumerist) way of writing about and engaging with the consumption of goods and services. However, consumers frequently use or interact with media in ways unintended by site owners, or express different levels of (unanticipated) discursive agency across any number of settings. Therefore, it is equally possible that prosumers could approach the activity of “Yelping” as a practice of citizenship over a pure celebration of consumerism – for example, prosumers are equally apt to encode reviews with politicized messages of resistance as they are to reinforce conventional consumerist ideologies. With that in mind, this chapter attempts to account for the range of agentic possibilities that manifest in consumer reviews on this particular website. A critical content and discourse analysis of consumer-generated content on Yelp pays particular attention to how Yelpers write and talk; thus, this chapter addresses the following research question centered on the politics of consumption: How do prosumers discursively construct the politics of consumption on Yelp through their reviews? In other words, if all consumption is political, as Daunton and Hilton (2001) suggest, how (if at all) are discourses of prosumer-citizenship reflected in Yelp reviews? Related research questions address the degree to which Yelpers restrict critique to a discursively consumerist framework (e.g., “this is good/this is bad”), and analyzes the extent to which reviewers discursively reify or reject Yelp’s construction of the “normal customer experience.” Additionally, the construction of discourse is considered in relationship to Yelp’s architecture as a means of determining the degree to which site structure shapes review content, as theorized in Chapter Two.

This chapter also considers the different discursive categories of the “local” that Yelpers bring to their reviews. Particularly, how do Yelp users invoke the local in reviews, and are there other ways of constructing “localism” beyond Yelp’s strictly geographical articulation?

Theoretically, there are myriad ways that local businesses and services can be analyzed and evaluated by consumer-reviewers; for example, critiques pertaining to the ways in which businesses serve their communities, treat their employees (also local citizens) or engage in ecologically sustainable practices begin fusing consumer and citizen concerns within a distinctly local context. Thus, in describing and evaluating the range of critiques that consumer-reviewers bring to their prosumption activities on Yelp, this research also attends to how the “local” is situated within these critiques. Ultimately, this chapter explores the politics of consumption on Yelp and the various ways prosumers utilize the space as a platform for [localized] consumer-citizenship.

Methods

A critical discourse analysis of consumer reviews on Yelp explores how prosumers talk about their consumption practices in this format, and to evaluate the ways in which consumer reviews manifest consumer-citizenship. Analysis also describes and evaluates articulations of the “local” as central to these experiences. In this chapter I am responding specifically to Papacharissi’s (2009) call for research on the architectures of online space, in which she argues for the examination of how social media users reject or accommodate to the available templates made possible by web architecture. Therefore, the findings in this chapter serve to triangulate data analyzed in Chapters Three, while also contributing to, and triangulating, the user perspectives and experiences outlined in Chapter Five. This section begins with an outline of the sensitizing constructs that informed the research and analysis for this chapter. Following this review I discuss the sampling procedures and process of data collection I employed, concluding with a description of the methods selected for data analysis and my rationale for these decisions.

Sensitizing Constructs

Micheletti's (2003) definition of political consumerism and Jubas's (2007) work on critical consumption largely informed the sensitizing constructs for this part of the study. For Jubas, critical consumption ties together rights and responsibilities, as well as consumers and producers, linking all individuals to one another along the global commodity chain. In order to understand where the politics of consumption emerge on Yelp, and to see what level of discursive agency Yelpers bring to the site as consuming citizens, I entered the coding process having pre-determined theoretical constructs of "empowered consumption," "political consumerism," "commodity fetishism" and "localism." Since these are relatively broad conceptual categories, I considered the more refined attributes of "citizenship," "production" and "consumption." Additionally, the concept of "localism" also guided this analysis given Yelp's geographical orientation and the legacy of "territory" to conventional notions of the "true citizen" rooted to "an organic communal identity" (Skinner, 1998). I elaborate on each of these sensitizing constructs below.

Citizenship. The conceptual category of "citizenship" is informed by conventional notions of the term, and included expressions related to with "rights, duties, participation and equality" (Soper, 2007, p. 206), which relates to the six "Rs" outlined by Jubas (2007): rights, responsibilities, resources, recognition, residence and resistance (these are discussed in detail in Chapter Two).⁸⁰ Many of these characteristics overlap with one another; for example, the struggle for "resources" as a form of democratic citizenship tends to be invariably connected to "rights" as well as issues "production." For this reason, I have not organized my findings to account for each of these constructs separately.

⁸⁰ The struggle for resources, for instance, would involve mobilizing consumers as citizens around issues of minimum wages, fair prices, employment opportunities, the establishment of co-operatives, as well as a responsibility towards fair trade, better working conditions and ethical modes of production.

Production. I conceptualized “production” in the Marxian sense and therefore coded social processes and relations obfuscated in the fetishism of commodities. Discourses of production, for example, attended to any number of issues related to the exploitation of workers including, but not limited to, labor and employment practices, work conditions, wages and pay, ancillary benefits (e.g., vacation, pensions, healthcare), outsourcing practices, ownership structure, community presence (versus absentee ownership), taxes rates and expressed commitments to social justice and local community. Additionally, attending to production-oriented critiques also served to account for Yelpers who expressed personal concerns with a particular business’s practices outside the context of a larger consumer movement or vitriolic anti-consumer ideology. Also, production accounted for discourses concerned with notion of “re-connecting consumers and producers,” a central focus of the fair trade and ethical consumerism movements.⁸¹

Consumption. Alternatively, the conceptual category “consumption” refers to traditional descriptors of the “consumer” as one who utilizes economic goods in the private domain. Such articulations included expressions by self-interested consumers concerned with their own individual private needs and desires (Soper, 2007, p. 206). This included explicitly hedonistic commentary that reflects the ethos of consumption as driven by novelty, passion, desire, variety, choice and individualism, as well as “rational utility-maximizing” statements such as getting the best value-for-money (Dauntton & Hilton, 2001, p. 5; Littler, 2009).

⁸¹ Re-connecting producers and consumers aims to improve information about the social, environmental and/or geographical conditions of goods along all steps of the commodity chain and the goal of providing enhanced returns to producers (Bernstein & Campling, 2006, p. 427).

Localism. A final conceptual category of analysis is *localism*, a seemingly obvious term that Trentmann (2007, p. 148) defines as a “shared public domain.” Attention to the “local” was also informed by Jubas’s (2007) theorization of “residence” which “connotes larger issues of geopolitics that continue to contextualize both consumption and citizenship” (p. 247). For Jubas, residence is central to the citizen-consumer construct in that consumption can be practiced as an expression of loyalty and affiliation on a local, national or global level.

Data Collection & Sampling

At the time of data collection, Yelp featured over 15 million reviews on its site to encompass twenty different business and service “categories” that span the range of “public” services (e.g., Mass Media, Education, Public Services and Government) to “private” businesses (e.g., Restaurants, Shopping, Nightlife, Financial Services). In order to narrow down the sample size, reviews were theoretically selected from categories that encompassed properties that encompassed different affective associations along the public/private service continuum.

In the field of consumer studies, research argues that most consumption decisions are based or evaluated on the degree to which our utilitarian and hedonic goals will be satisfied (Khan, Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2005). Goods or services that meet hedonic goals are typically defined as being “multisensory and provide for experiential consumption, fun, pleasure, and excitement” (e.g., restaurants, amusement parks, chocolate or flower shops); utilitarian goods, on the other hand, “are primarily instrumental and their purchase is motivated by functional product aspects” (e.g., grocery stores, post office, police station, the doctor) (Khan, Dhar & Wertenbroch, p. 147). A key difference is the *level* or *degree* of discretion used in the consumption of either category (e.g., hedonic goods tend to be consumed with more discretion than utilitarian goods) yet goods can also be *both* hedonic and utilitarian. For example, a cellphone can be

conceptualized as a utilitarian good if used in an emergency but hedonistic if purchased to talk with friends; similarly, a restaurant may be utilitarian if someone is traveling and needs to eat or hedonistic if consumed as a luxury in celebration of a special event with friends and family.

Goods and services also tend to be evaluated as “affect-rich” versus “affect-poor” in which the former “elicit associative imagery while affect-poor goods evoke little or no such imagery” (Khan, Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2005, p. 147). Affect-rich goods also tend to be more “experiential” or hedonistic in nature, and are thereby evaluated on the basis of emotions (e.g., “like” and “dislike”). Conversely, affect-poor goods tend to be consumed via more instrumental and analytical decisions (e.g., practicality). For example, the experience of purchasing stamps at a post office for most does not create the level of rich associative imagery of an experience at a fine-dining restaurant, farmer’s market or even a grocery store in which the latter examples are rife with colorful goods, selection (or, in the case of restaurants, a form of *affective labor*). As Khan, Dhar and Wertenbroch note, “Goods that are consumed for hedonic purposes tend to be more affect-rich than those that consumed for utilitarian purposes (although not all utilitarian products need to be affect-poor)” (p. 147). Thus, the distinction in *type* of goods might partially explain Yelp’s consumption or hedonic bias as demonstrated by the propensity to review restaurants over public services (the latter being “affect poor”).

With these distinctions in mind, I purposefully selected three search categories along the “public/private,” “utilitarian/hedonistic” and “affect poor/affect rich” continuum for their distinct orientation to consumption practices and relationship to the local: “Food” (private, hedonic, affect rich),⁸² “Health and Medical” (public/private, utilitarian, affect rich or poor), and “Public

⁸² Notably, Food can be either utilitarian or hedonistic, depending on the purpose or context of consumption.

Service and Government” (public, utilitarian, affect poor).⁸³ In making this decision, I selected the “Food” category because it encompassed private local businesses in a variety of genres beyond restaurants; many listings featured here were cross-listed in other “private” categories as well, and included restaurants,⁸⁴ coffee shops, grocery stores, gas stations and markets.⁸⁵ I selected Health and Medical as the second category because it traverses the borders of private and public; while many healthcare providers are private practitioners, related issues of healthcare, insurance and subsidized programs (e.g., Medicare) are often public issues. Additionally, I expected the category to contain socially and politically relevant utterances given the recent public debates over healthcare reform at the time of analysis. Last, Public Service and Government aimed to account for the how locals approached publicly funded organizations in consumption-oriented contexts (e.g., libraries, police stations, post offices and historical landmarks); arguably, these establishments and services are of central political, social and cultural importance to the local. Not only do these listings make up community services, but are often central to a region’s geographic identity, as well.

Since Yelp filters content by location, the sample had to be narrowed down to a specific geographic location. In doing so, I selected three community “types” – urban, suburban, and rural – across the state of Pennsylvania for personal and practical goals; one, my familiarity with the region insured that each community within the sample could, in fact, be characterized as

⁸³ These designations are not to suggest that any of the listings under each category is necessarily “bound” to a public/private designation and as socially constructed concepts all three overlap along this continuum. This is just one of many possible ways in which samples could have been theoretically justified.

⁸⁴ While “Restaurants” is the most popularly reviewed category on Yelp, I intentionally selected “Food” because it accounts for a greater variation in private, consumption-oriented activities and experiences. Many restaurants are listed under “Restaurants” are also cross-listed within this category.

⁸⁵ In reference to the above footnote, the Food category’s inclusion of farmer’s markets is one example of the difficulty in assigning consumption to specific spheres given the fact that many the farms and farmers are federally subsidized.

“urban, suburban or rural” and two, in order to maintain some degree of regional consistency.⁸⁶

Selecting three separate community types had two major goals: one, it aimed to account for the degree to which the content of reviews, and the expression of consumption, differed across location and community size; and two, purposefully selecting reviews by community type attempted to capture the variation, or heterogeneity, of users. For the urban sample, reviews were obtained from businesses and services within the city limits of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; with a population of approximately 305,000, Pittsburgh is the second-largest city in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Reviews within the suburban sample were obtained by a Yelp search for “Delaware County,” the state’s second most densely-populated urban county located outside the city of Philadelphia which has a population of over 885,000 (US Census Bureau).⁸⁷ I could not locate a single suburban community that had enough reviews in each category for analysis, so the decision to use Delaware County aggregated multiple suburbs in order to produce enough reviews for analysis.⁸⁸ Similarly, obtaining enough data for analysis in the rural sample also required aggregating a number of small communities across several rural counties in Pennsylvania as well.⁸⁹

Of the three designated categories for analysis, the “Food” category contained the most reviews across all three community types. Due to the large number of business listings and reviews in the urban and suburban “Food” category, I selected the top 50 most reviewed

⁸⁶ Definitions for urban, suburban and rural communities were adapted from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

⁸⁷ Collectively, the County’s 49 municipalities have a population of over 885,000 people; however, it is important to note that Yelp’s search engine does not produce an exhaustive list of every municipality even when using “Delaware County” as the search term. Instead, the site filters out a majority of large-sized townships within this county (e.g., Upper Darby, Chester) which have respective populations of 81,000 and 36,850. These townships were eliminated from the sample because of their size, but also as a way of producing a manageable amount of data.

⁸⁸ It should be noted, then, that each Philadelphia suburb located in Delaware County retains its own local identity

⁸⁹ Rural communities were included if 1) they had a population of less than 10,000 people, and 2) the community is located in a rural county as determined by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. The total number of communities aggregated in the rural sample population totaled 189, although a majority of these localities produced no reviews.

businesses for analysis, with the exception of the rural sample which only had 43 reviewed listings, and coded the first page of each listing (filtered by date). The total number of reviews coded for each community type in the Food category were urban (n=1,361), suburban (n=371) and rural (n=60). For Health and Medical, all reviews within each category were coded: urban (n=75), suburban (n=52), and rural (n=3).⁹⁰ All available reviews for Public Service and Government were also coded across urban (n=24), suburban (n=13) and rural (n=13) communities. Across all nine samples, a total of 1,972 (n=1,972) reviews were coded and analyzed.

Data Analysis

This chapter aimed to accomplish two goals through analysis: to *describe* the level of discursive agency evident in consumer-reviewing in the context of Yelp's architectural and consumerist constraints, and to systematically *evaluate* these reviews as a site for consumer-citizenship. Analytical procedures were influenced by DePew's (2007) description of digital textual analysis, which requires the researcher to "closely read or theoretically interpret tangible and/or digital texts generated with/through digital writing technologies (e.g., emails, transcripts from synchronous discussions, web pages)" (p. 52). This is a somewhat different in approach to critical discourse analysis which attends specifically to uncovering power relations; while CDA proved useful in understanding how Yelp's architectural formation frames participation and interaction, it did not necessarily feel like the "right" method for addressing basic questions about how prosumers tend to review businesses, or how they talked about the local as part of their consumption experiences. As Baptiste (2001) notes, a researcher's methods of analysis will largely depend on the *purpose* of the study and research questions posed. Therefore, this chapter

⁹⁰ Many businesses listings within this category had only one review each.

takes a hybrid approach that combines procedures of data analysis informed by the principles of CDA (van Dijk, 1993) as well as more interpretive forms of qualitative textual analysis (e.g., DePew, 2007; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In addition to this analysis I also used the method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in the development of categories and themes in order to develop and assess similarities and differences between the reviews and nine data samples (e.g., Food, Medical, Government/Public Services across urban, suburban and rural communities). Constant comparison involves the systematic comparison of texts within and between their assigned categories “in order to fully understand the theoretical properties of the category” (Zhang & Wildemuth, p. 4); thus, I consistently compared and contrasted, discarded, discounted, narrowed, expanded, refined and re-thought the data through all stages of the analytical process (Baptiste).

Admittedly then, this chapter takes liberties with the tradition of CDA by employing strategies informed by the tradition of textual analysis in digital research (e.g., DePew, 2007) and qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005); this approach served to systematically and appropriately describe data before evaluating it in relation to the proposed research questions through a critical lens. The sheer volume of reviews in the data set (n=1,972) motivated this hybrid approach in that it provided a more practical way of immersing myself in the content. As an organizing principle I turned towards a more systematic means of coding and evaluating data than typically described in CDA studies (in which methods of data analysis are rarely, if ever, disclosed). As common to CDA, I did not approach data analysis as a “blank slate” but entered the analytical process with the theoretically-informed

sensitizing constructs of consumer-citizenship (consumerism, citizenship), commodity fetishism (production; embedded social relations) and localism to guide my analysis.⁹¹

At the earliest stages of analysis, I read through the reviews of all nine samples in order to become familiar with the material, recording initial thoughts and potential themes in analytical memos (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In order to address the first research question presented in this chapter (“What level of discursive agency, engagement and critique do prosuming “locals” bring to their reviews?”), I entered the data analysis process by coding for the most predominant review criteria that appeared across all nine samples. Guided by the sensitizing constructs discussed above, the coding process began by “tagging” data related to the research questions and applying labels (codes) to those meaning units (Baptiste, 2001; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). This allowed me to systematically organize manifest or *descriptive* data before engaging in the later identification of more *latent* themes (Graneheim & Lundman). Borrowing distinctly from Graneheim and Lundman, codes were given a definition and listed in an Excel document with the “condensed meaning units” (shorted meaning units that preserve the core meaning of the text/utterance) listed beside each code. Some of the more salient or descriptive meaning units – the direct quotes – were preserved in their entirety for later reference. Reviews were coded exhaustively until no new codes emerged. As coding began to reach saturation those that shared notable commonalities were collapsed into *categories* - which Patton (1987) has described as the process of taking common codes into groups that are “internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous” (cited in Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p. 107). Collapsing codes into categories

⁹¹ While 1,972 reviews might seem like too much content for a single research to adequately immerse in, it should be noted that many of these reviews were no more than a few sentences or were straight-forward and thus easily “codeable.” I also began this textual analysis in May 2010 and did not complete it until March 2011 so the time involved in this analysis should also indicate the rigor and attention given to the data immersion process.

“implies the formation of definitions” which continued to be defined and refined throughout the analytical process (Baptiste, p. 10).

In order to describe the content produced in consumer reviews, categories were then further collapsed into *themes*. Graneheim and Lundman (2004, p. 107) account for theme development as the process of linking the underlying meanings of categories, and can be described as “an expression of the latent content of the text.” It is in the formation of themes that my critical approach to data analysis departs from interpretive approaches of qualitative content analysis. In line with the method of critical discourse analysis, I did not aim to be exhaustive in collapsing all categories into mutually exclusive themes, nor did these themes “emerge” from the data via “examination and constant comparison” (e.g., Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 309); rather, I entered the analytical process with certain expectations that certainly influenced my conceptualization of categories as well as themes. As van Dijk (1993) notes, the goals of CDA do not aim to merely observe, describe or explain social behaviors or phenomenon but to uncover systems of power relations. Therefore, I did not limit analysis to the presentation and explanation of themes alone; instead, I turned back to the data for a third time and read again through a critical lens with an attention to the way themes and anomalies addressed questions about the level of discursive agency consumers brought to their reviews. In the interactive and iterative fashion of qualitative research methods, themes were refined; select passages that best described each theme analyzed the linguistic and discursive strategies employed by reviewers. Re-reading through the reviews in this way insured that cursory themes were appropriate to their original context; it would have been easy, for example, to claim that Yelp is a political tool after isolating “political consumerism” as a theme and locating examples that justified this theme. Yet re-reading the theme of political consumerism within the holistic context of a large sample

reminded me of just how anomalous these occurrences actually were. By reviewing my findings holistically (back in their original context) through the lens of CDA *after* a systematic content analysis, I felt more confident in my claim that reviews articulate the politics of consumption through a predominantly “consumerist” lens; that is, while individual prosumers bring varying levels of agency to their reviews of their consumption experience, reviews generally privilege apolitical forms of consumer-citizenship that are focused on individual empowerment over collective organization or activism. Exceptions to empowered consumption do, of course, exist on the site, which this chapter reveals. To conclude, the return to CDA also helped build on previous research from Chapter Three, acknowledging the larger implications of consumer-citizenship, localism and consumer-reviewing in the context of Yelp’s commercial business model and architecture. Observations of content were finally situated against conclusions drawn about Yelp’s virtual geography in Chapter Three with a focus on the degree to which site architecture influenced the discourse and agency of consumer-reviewers.

As a final note on data analysis, during the analytical process it became apparent that the boundaries drawn around urban, suburban and rural communities posed a number of problems that compromised the intent of the study. The process of constant comparison between reviews, between categories and between community types could have been a dissertation in and of itself. Furthermore, not enough content existed in the rural sample to draw sustainable claims. To summarize the reasons for eliminating this mode of analysis in three points: One, urban, suburban and rural demarcations proved to be inherently problematic; they are socially constructed, fluid categorizations that in most cases did not appear to capture the range of lived experiences; Two, it became quickly apparent that users living physically in one community type

(e.g., suburban) often identified themselves as part of another (e.g., urban);⁹² Three, many Yelp reviews were produced by tourists or non-locals who did not live within the community of the business location and thus really have no relationship to the local. While I originally thought these distinctions could be accounted for in the written results, it was not always possible to know where the author lived at the time he or she published a particular review. Therefore, analytical distinctions between community types are not addressed in the findings unless otherwise noted.

Findings

This section begins with an analysis of how Yelpers approach the task of consumer reviewing. Analysis revealed that prosumers overwhelmingly tend to describe and evaluate businesses and services in a manner consistent with Yelp's Review Guidelines (e.g., a "first-hand," "normal customer experience"). Users create what is ultimately a resource guide to assist in empowered consumption which occurs through two means: one, the utilitarianism of reviews and two, the celebration of consumption. By treating "consumers-as-customers," the discursive possibilities of consumer-citizenship are largely restricted to a form of "empowered consumption" grounded in a *lifestyle politics* (Bennett, 2004) and consistent with the ideologies of neoliberal consumer capitalism.

⁹² The use of urban and rural as constructs for measuring communities are problematic for a number of reasons, but foremost because they are typically classified by researchers through a subjective lens that does not represent their referents in any heterogeneous way (Dewey, 1960). The definitions and parameters that demark urban and rural communities are different in use not only in scholarly research but in federal and state organizations; the definition of what constitutes a "rural" community, for example, is much different according to the US Census than The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, for instance. Population size, population density, work commutes, personality and environment are just some variables used in the designation of rural and urban communities across various and competing classifications. While urban and rural communities might best be understood on a continuum, this fails to address some of the more important questions pertaining to level of anonymity, social relations and social ties, perceptions of labor and other concerns that might apply to the dynamics of any locality based on size, familiarity, etc. The problem is not just urban sprawl eating up the countryside, but that many people in rural American commute into larger cities or towns where irrespective of location they tend shop at the same places, go to the same type of schools, engage in the same media and lead similar lives.

After establishing the limitations of Yelp's brand of consumer-citizenship, this research turns towards moments in which consumers-as-activists emerge to utilize Yelp as a platform for political consumerism and activism. These notably anomalous moments point out the potential for consumer-reviewing to serve as a platform by which consumers acting as citizens use this space to create discourses that agitate for rights, resources, and recognition in the marketplace. While political consumption here is addressed in relation to individual identity and *lifestyle politics*, it also demonstrates how consumption and citizenship appear on the site to potentially affect social and political change at the local level. Finally, analysis then turns towards how Yelpers discursively construct the concept of the "local" in their reviews. These findings are then considered in relation to consumer-citizenship on Yelp overall, suggesting that localism is as much a brand strategy as it is a means for identification and political process.

Yelp as Resource Guide: Consumers as Customers

When critiquing a business or service, Yelp reviewers generally tend to consider the same things.⁹³ That is, Yelp reviews are relatively consistent in style and evaluative techniques across all three categories (Food, Medical and Government/Public Services) and community types (urban, suburban, and rural). Reviews in all nine samples featured predominantly the same type of content employed through similar reviewing strategies. Nearly all reviews focused primarily on two things: 1) Describing and evaluating product offerings and experience (*utilitarianism*), which typically occurs through the 2) Disclosure of personal information and narratives (*celebration of consumption*). While most reviewers assumed their own "style" of writing, few

⁹³ I would also argue that future research on the consumer review as a *genre* might also serve as a compelling entry point into ways of looking at prosumption. See Pollach (2006) for an introductory analysis of online product reviews as a "digital genre."

reviewers deviated from these themes which are also consistent with Yelp's established Review Guidelines.

Utilitarianism. In general, reviews are dominated by standard “critic” criteria that focus on a detailed description and evaluation of an establishment and its “product” offerings. The most common descriptors across all nine samples included reference to: atmosphere and aesthetics (e.g., décor, presentation, layout),⁹⁴ product or service description (e.g., quality, ingredients, taste, technical info), selection (e.g., availability, variety), general information (e.g., hours of operation, number of electrical outlets, insurance, bike rentals, what to expect), amenities (e.g., free Wi-Fi, valet parking, bathrooms), service (e.g., treatment, wait time, staff), price (e.g., cost, value-for-money) and history (e.g., business history, local history). There is little distinction in this regard between Food, Medical and Government/Public Services. The following review of an urban coffee shop (urban, Food) is a good example of the utilitarian features consistent across the typical review:

Positive: great location, free wireless, several very nice baristas.

Negative: 2 outlets (it's no longer cute), wobbly tables, terrible coffee, burnt, low quality, inconsistent. Haven't tried more frou frou drinks. The occasional inexplicably asshole employee.

As evidenced in this [albeit short] review, most attention is spent on supplying general information about an establishment including available amenities (e.g., free Wi-Fi), aesthetics (e.g., wobbly tables), product description (e.g., terrible/burnt coffee), general information (e.g., great location) and service (e.g., nice baristas, asshole employee). Almost every review contains some comment on service and staff in each category and community type. As with the other

⁹⁴ For example, one review focuses on a suburban coffee shop's décor, stating: “[the space] has personality in the shades of burnt orange and browns. The tables are gorgeous and are made of solid wood. In the center of the place there are some comfy couches and a coffee table with games, which gives the place a sort of living room feel. It looks like someone put a ton of thought into the decor but sort of failed when it came to the ceiling tiles.... I really hate ceiling tiles.”

more utilitarian factors, service critiques appear not only in Food listings, but in the Medical and Government/Public service categories, as well. However, consistent with the site's overall consumerist orientation, "service" tends to be narrowly defined to emphasize *quality* ("good" versus "bad") over other possibilities (e.g., those that might account for labor practices, working conditions or identification with the service experience). Instead, service is evaluated in terms of *attitude* (friendly, rude, polite, impolite), *efficiency* (fast, slow, dis/organized) and employee *aptitude* (knowledgeable; not knowledgeable).⁹⁵ Service critiques range vastly in detail, but tend to take one of two forms: service is briefly referenced without elaboration (e.g., "friendly, knowledgeable and happy employees;" "the people who work here are competent and time effective") or elaborate, lengthy personal narratives of the reviewer's first-hand experience. These two variations are exemplified in the sample reviews below:

First of all, you can tell he really cares about his patients, which is something I really appreciate. He made me feel very comfortable throughout the whole process. Also, he was always on time. I never waited more than a few minutes to see him at any of my appointments. In addition to all of that, I had a quick recovery from my surgery and successful results.

I was admonished by the staff who told me that that their beans are so fulfilling that a small should be fine and I would not need a large coffee. I told him I was cold and tired and yes, in fact, I wanted a LARGE coffee! After winning this small battle, I asked if they had any Splenda. When I uttered the word "Splenda" you would have thought I just announced that I had a bomb in my coat pocket. The employees stopped cold in their tracks and gawked at me. I received another lecture about how they did have Splenda but they did not want me to use it. WHO SAYS THAT??? I was told that as the bean cools, it naturally sweetens the coffee. I have never heard of SWEET black coffee. Instead of handing over the Splenda, I was told to try to [sic] coffee first to make sure it really needed sweetener. Um YEAH, it DOES! Then I received a 5 minute lecture on their coffee and milk and blah blah blah before they finally gave me the damn Splenda. I felt completely belittled and insulted for ordering a large coffee with Splenda on the side. While these people may be knowledgeable, they were condescending and certainly did not understand the concept of the "Customer is Always Right."

⁹⁵ One notable exception is the urban sample in which several reviews encourage or remind consumers to tip their servers.

While the above critiques range on the “good-bad” scale, both invoke limited “service” criteria of efficiency (timeliness), attitude (caring, rude, condescending) and competency (successful, knowledgeable).

The issue of *negative* reviews seemingly problematizes claims about Yelp’s celebration of consumption. However, a closer look at negative reviews demonstrates that these comments merely *invert* positive critiques and thus remain situated in a celebratory discourse. Negative critiques, then, are not based in rhetoric of *anti-consumption* but are grounded in a disappointment that consumerist expectations were not met. One of the ways this occurs is by invoking the same evaluative techniques employed in positive (celebratory) reviews only to negatively review a business. Below are two reviews (suburban, Food and urban, Food, respectively) in which this occurs:

Okay, how is this disappointing failure of a farmer's market getting five stars from some of you guys?! It's a waste of a beautiful building--all it has to offer Suburban Square's patrons is a spotty produce stand, mediocre sushi, greasy, uniformly-colored Chinese food and horrendous coffee c/o Buck's County. The Amish are okay (thanks for the free pretzel samples, guys!) but everything else could disappear tomorrow and I wouldn't miss it. It keeps weird hours, too.

Atmosphere: ranges from eclectic to careless and haphazard. I wish I hadn't come here to work. There are very few places set up for a single person and way too many mismatched, klunky chairs in this place. I almost never say something like 'I wish I had gone to Starbucks' but that's the lash back response I'm having to the overly quirky set up of this place.

As in positive reviews, negative reviews are grounded in a critique of first-person narratives that rely on the same type of utilitarian criteria as positive expressions of consumption – quality of food, atmosphere, aesthetics, amenities and general business information. In other words, even

negative critique is grounded in a consumerist discourse driven by detailed personal narratives and self-presentation (often through the strategy of positive self/negative-other presentation).⁹⁶

Celebration of consumption and the self. The use of the term “utilitarian” to characterize the criteria by which Yelpers tend to evaluate businesses and services does not mean that reviews are “objective” or bare-bones; rather, the utilitarian nature of Yelp reviews demonstrate that writers are more likely to draw from consumerist-oriented criteria as the basis of evaluation over other possible considerations. As argued in Chapter Three, the general culture or *structure of feeling* (Williams, 1977) on Yelp is overwhelmingly one that celebrates the act of consumption in all its glorious and hedonic forms, which is notably consistent with how the site structures participation as discussed in Chapter Three. Even listings within the Medical and Government/Public Services categories, which may seem sterile and straight-forward services on the surface, are often described and evaluated in the same spirit.

Yelp’s celebratory nature manifests most prominently through the use of two related rhetorical strategies – through the insertion of *personal information* (e.g., experiences and self-disclosures) and through the insertion of “lovemarks” (i.e., expressions of personal *affect* as it relates to individual acts of consumption). In both cases, consumer reviewing places the reviewing self at the center of the consumption experience which reinforces a Romantic ethos of

⁹⁶ While review criteria were fairly consistent across each sample, a few notable differences between the Food, Medical and Government/Public Services categories did arise. For example, across all six urban and suburban samples, a vast number of reviews focus on traffic and parking that do not appear in the rural sample (which makes sense given that traffic or parking shortages are typically not as common in rural areas). Urban and suburban samples were also more likely to reference specific *brands* available at particular locations in the Food category, although I have no hypothesis for why this might be the case and formulating one is outside the scope of this project. Generally, however, the distinctions between and within categories seemed to have more to do with the utter lack of reviews in certain categories more than anything else. It is also difficult to make claims – and unfair to try – when comparatively few reviews exist in any one category. Therefore, while cross-comparisons of consumer reviewing across community type were an original part of this project’s proposal, it emerged as a less important issue in the context of this study’s larger research questions and is thus not addressed here in any more detail.

consumption as an individual, rather than a collective, notion.⁹⁷ Both of these rhetorical strategies are discussed separately below.

Personal information and self-presentation. In addition to providing standard or utilitarian information, reviewers tend to elaborate in detail about their personal experience with any given establishment; at times, the information is extremely personal. During the coding process, two distinct but related forms of the “personal” were repeatedly located in reviews: the disclosure of “factual” personal *information* (e.g., hometown, location, age, occupation) and *self-presentation* (e.g., interests, beliefs, values) in which highly personal narratives provided insight to the writer’s social status, taste cultures and lifestyle. Both forms of the “personal” revealed in narrative forms included nostalgic iterations of the past or descriptive recounts of recent consumption experiences. For example, this abbreviated review of a local library (urban, Government/Public Services) exemplifies the way the writer utilizes the review space to disclose personal information as a means of self-presentation (e.g., social status) through her critique:

*One day, I was moving to yet another hip, affordable, and stylish apartment, and I realized I owned too many books. I consider up to 10 boxes of books a "small library," so you know I had a serious problem if I was confessing I had too many! I looked at my budget and realized I was spending - literally - hundreds of dollars a month on books...Well, I sold all the books I could bear to live without, and traded my book budget in for a CLPGH library card. I've been reading more, fresher material, books that were often too expensive for me to buy, the books that ****never**** went on sale, and my book passion went from extremely expensive to voraciously insatiable within a month...The check-out times are adequate, most of the staff goes above and beyond in their every word and deed, providing small kindnesses and excellent recommendations. They have dvds, vhs, and cds as well. They have virtually every magazine you could want -- visit the main branch for a coffee shop, extensive stacks, an exquisitely re-modeled library, and a beautiful magazine reading room complete with a zen garden outdoor courtyard.*

⁹⁷ While this individualism is distinct from articulations of the collective, it does not mean that individualistic expressions take place outside Yelp’s (or consumerism’s) distinctly *social* context; I am intentionally distinguishing between the “collective” as a political concept and the “social” in the communicative sense, where individuals “assemble” and interact for self-fulfilling purposes while contributing to an organized whole.

In this review we learn that the writer is an avid reader with a hip and stylish lifestyle able to spend “literally – hundreds of dollars” on books each month. While her personal experience has little to do with the library itself, the review concludes with specific details, recommendations and specific *endorsements* (e.g., “visit the main branch for a coffee shop”).⁹⁸ In this case, the reviewer advises on the cost-benefit of the local library and how to maximize the value of the experience in a way that also presents the self within specific taste cultures (Bourdieu, 1986).

The combination of utilitarian information and self-presentation provides readers with a sense of who the writer is before taking his or her recommendations on a business. Interestingly, Yelp solicits and structures self-disclosure (e.g., “truth, trust, transparency”) to serve this very function; that is, the more information about personal lifestyle and interests one offers about herself, the more reliable her reviews become. According to Yelp, “The more people can relate to you, the more your reviews and opinions start to matter” (Yelp Elite, 2011). The site actually refers to user profiles as “personalities,” underscoring the importance self-presentation factors into the review process and, by default, the decision-making processes of others. As Yelp’s CEO Stoppelman states, “If you knew more about a person, and you knew what their opinions are of local businesses, you could search over that; if you could gather all that content and create a really compelling way to find the best local businesses” (Valerio, 2010).⁹⁹ Thus, “transparency” can be triangulated with the user’s profile information which aims to assist in helping people know “what you’re all about” (“About Yelp,” 2011). According to Yelp’s promotional discourse,

⁹⁸ Endorsements are common as is the tendency to offer specific advice (e.g., “Try the calamari!”, “Go on a Wednesday to avoid the crowds”) and sometimes explicit warnings (e.g., “Do not waste your money here!”).

⁹⁹ Several participants discussed the usefulness that self-presentation, personality and the acknowledgement of taste cultures by other reviews plays in their own decision-making processes; oftentimes, these disclosures have practical implications. According to one Yelper I interviewed, lengthier and more detailed reviews were central to his ability to make better consumption decisions: “How do I learn *your style* or *your taste*? Become familiar with you as a reviewer?... If I know their review style I can go, ‘Alright, I know they’re not big into seafood and they gave somebody four stars then I’ll probably really like it because I like seafood so I’ll be more willing to take a chance on that because I know I like seafood better than they do.’”

the more people know about you, the more reliable your reviews become – a “knowledge,” of course, that is inextricably bound to social status, cultural signs and symbols.

Yelp’s emphasis on personal self-disclosure and self-presentation also works to subordinate the collective to that of the individual, especially within the social space of Yelp where self-presentation is an important part of participating in the Yelp “community.” For example, one woman describing a local food co-operative (urban, Food) writes her review in a first-person narrative that discloses details about her dietary choices and food preferences: “I’ve recently changed to eating vegan and this place has everything I need...All different types of vegan (as well as some non-vegan) canned goods, soymilks, vegan cheeses, and meat substitutes are available.” What is significant here is that the review is written on the basis of how the store fulfills her individual needs (“this place has everything *I need*”). Alternatively, the review *could have* been written in the third-person (“this place has everything *vegans need*; it has all different types of vegan goods”). Written in the third-person, this review would have recognized the health and dietary needs of others in addition to her own; it also could have promoted the co-op as a viable resource for alternative or “ethical” consumption practices (whether or not veganism translates into more “ethical” modes of consumption, of course, is debatable). Instead, the review reads as a form of self-presentation that reinforces a highly individualistic mode of consumption. This latter point is compounded by the fact that the reviewer’s self-disclosure is personal but *not personal enough*; whether or not the decision to “go vegan” was a dietary necessity, experiment or political choice is not known, likely leaving most reviewers to assume that her veganism is a lifestyle (and possibly class-based) choice that ultimately reinscribes a number of social and material assumptions (Jubas, 2007). To be clear, such instances of self-presentation are not restricted to food-related businesses that are easier to consume as a symbolic form of social

status; rather, these same tendencies appear in reviews of medical and government services, as well. For example, a review of a local suburban library (suburban, Government/Public Services) states:

I'm a voracious reader and I get my material from many sources. I'm addicted to my Kindle so Amazon's got my number. I also patronize Cathy's Half Price Books. Finally I'm a regular at this library. Free is always good.

While the library review, like the co-op review, infers product availability (e.g., books, vegan food), the reviews are primarily dominated by *individual self-presentation* and say more about the establishment in relation to the *self* above anything else.

Love marks. The expression of personal affect is a second reoccurring feature across Yelp reviews and takes the form of what Jenkins (2006) refers to as “lovemarks” in which a consumer expresses love and affection for particular brands. As both a brand strategy and outcome of brand loyalty, lovemarks are positive expressions about a company or product made by brand advocates, fans or “inspirational consumers.” According to Jenkins, eliciting brand loyalty through the expression of lovemarks is central to the “affective economic model” of participatory web cultures like Yelp. As a relatively recent marketing model, affective economics “seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions” (Jenkins, p. 62). Affective economics and the associated strategy of “lovemarks” have exploded as marketers look for ways to “break through the clutter” of the contemporary media landscape and appeal to consumers in the context of changing business relations brought, in part, by prosumer-driven social media sites like Yelp.

The literal use of the term “love” is a common rhetorical strategy used across reviews in almost all samples (rural Medical is the one exception where “lovemarks” did not occur). Such statements read: “I love this place, I truly do!;” “I love love love love love this bakery;” “I miss

you. It's been 3 years since I've seen you;" "I heart this place;" and even "I love this post office above all others." Lovemarks are significant to the overwhelmingly celebratory nature of Yelp reviews because they are one way in which reviewers ground their frequent endorsements for specific businesses. Lovemarks are not only celebratory but also contribute to self-identification (or self-branding) as a mechanism for presenting oneself as a certain "type" of person.

Lovemarks also convey social status in that it is often the case that certain "types" of people associate with certain businesses and services; therefore, the deeper the expression of love, the more closely "aligned" a person becomes with the "brand identity" that a business or service portrays. The deeper the expressed "love," the more symbolic the association.

The issue of lovemarks is problematized in the context of Yelp, however, by the reviews of public establishments and small-scale medical facilities where exchanges are not-for-profit (e.g., parks, libraries) or deeply personal (e.g., a woman's midwife; a cancer doctor). In such cases, expression of affiliation, identity or nostalgia makes it difficult to critique affective economics as a means of exploiting the personal attachments of consumers to service providers, or to suggest that those personal attachments are somehow a product of false nostalgia and status seeking. Placing personal affect back into context reveals that relatively few expressions in the Medical and Government/Public Services categories exist compared to the frequency located in Food reviews. In the Government/Public Services category, such "lovemarks" occurred in relation to a non-profit radio station, a funicular railway, the National Park Services and a post office. In Medical, lovemarks occurred more commonly in the form of *gratitude* (often by invoking the word "thanks") for dental and medical services rather than a form of "brand" loyalty. That being said, the celebratory nature of consumption through expressions of personal affect remains consistent albeit for different motives and goals.

A second distinction between Jenkins' (2006) use of "lovemarks" and this project is that the affective economic model is typically discussed in terms of transnational corporate brands, not local or independent businesses. While it may seem strange to talk about "brands" in the context of local businesses, medical facilities and public services, the frequent expressions of personal affect, I believe, are unquestionably occurring in the context of non-corporate, "unbranded" local establishments (both commercial and non-profit). It is significant, for example, that the most frequently reviewed businesses on Yelp are non-corporate chains despite the fact that chains are equally available for review. Second, it is also significant that a majority of reviews on Yelp are positive; on a strictly quantitative level, 83% of Yelp's total reviews are three stars or higher (so only 17% of Yelp's 17 million reviews have issued the lowest possible ratings of one or two stars) ("About Yelp," 2011). This has a number of interesting and potentially problematic implications for local businesses within the context of affective economics and the emerging local web. It is not a far leap to suggest that as a growing consumer resource consulted by over 50 million people each month, the emerging local web's commercial platform is working to subsume the "local" into the logic of the brand.¹⁰⁰

Between the utilitarian and celebratory approach to reviewing, Yelp serves as a useful resource guide that predominantly regards consumers not as citizens but, well, as consumers.

¹⁰⁰ As a tactic for generating the emotional involvement of consumers, lovemarks on Yelp are different than those examined by Jenkins (2006) in other ways, as well. On Yelp, it is not the individual *business* or brand eliciting affect or emotional identification; rather, Yelp aggregates stores, services and brands which users then *voluntarily* search out - without incentive - to review and celebrate. For example, Jenkins provides the example of Coca-Cola's website, which provides consumers with the opportunity to relate stories or memories that one has of personal "Coke" related experiences. In telling these stories, consumers conjure emotions that can then be exploited by marketers while shedding insight into the *context* of consumption; this context can be later pre-structured into *other* places or through other means and thus helps to create [or replicate] new consumption experiences based on those that consumers have already shared. In most cases, local businesses do not have the time or the resources to engage in affective economic strategies or brand marketing; however, Yelp offers local businesses and services the same opportunity (whether they want it or not) and the results are theirs to exploits. As prosumers willingly share their detailed consumption experiences and lovemarks (including nostalgia and the consumption context) *without prompting from the business itself*, Yelp offers marketers and businesses alike free focus groups that provide details as to how goods can be marketed in more meaningful ways.

Borrowing Cohen's (2001, 2003) term, I have opted to call this the "*customer consumer*" approach to reviewing; meaning, Yelpers articulate a discourse about consumption useful to those who first and foremost seek "to maximize their personal economic interests in the marketplace" (p. 204). Cohen developed this term in contrast to *citizen-consumers* as to account for the attachment of free market principles (i.e., the classical economic approach) to issues of production and consumption in 20th century consumer politics.¹⁰¹

A discourse that promotes consumers as *customers* suggests that Yelp promotes a brand of consumer-citizenship that seeks to empower consumers with information they need to navigate the overwhelming number of choices made available by contemporary consumer capitalism. Accordingly, consumers-as-customers can be empowered by Yelp to act efficiently and autonomously; if used correctly, this means fewer surprises, less waste, and a higher likelihood of getting the best value-for-price. Within this context, personal narratives and disclosures not only work to celebrate consumption and the self, but also serve a utilitarian function that accounts for consumers-as-customers; writing one's lifestyle, tastes and preferences into a review enables other readers to evaluate businesses and services on these terms. The goal here, of course, is that readers are more likely to take the opinions of those with whom they identify or whose status they might seek to emulate (Bourdieu, 1986). This approach is much different than more politicized forms of consumer-citizenship, where Yelpers utilize the review space as a means for asserting or agitating for a variety of political, economic, social and cultural rights, responsibilities, recognition and resources. In the next section I review a second but anomalous form of consumer-citizenship on Yelp that situates consumers as *citizens/activists*.

¹⁰¹ Cohen's (2001) history of consumer-citizenship marks the emergence of the customer citizen as early as the Progressive Era to characterize those who lobbied for laissez-faire approaches to anti-trust regulation.

Yelp as a Political Platform: Consumer as Citizen/Activist

While it has been established that Yelpers tend to predominantly critique businesses as *customer consumers*, there are pockets of resistance throughout the site in which Yelpers transform consumer reviews as a space for political agitation. In reflecting on the politics of consumption, it seems appropriate to return to Micheletti's (2003, p. 2) definition of political consumerism as a practice motivated by a commitment to social justice. It is the action by people who make *intentional* choices from available "producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices." In contrast to the nascent form of empowered consumption that consumers-as-customers promote, these types of reviewers result from consumers writing as citizens and/or activists; in other words, individuals who center their engagement around "changing objectionable institutional or market practices" (p. 2). As we will see, this form of politicized consumer-citizenship on Yelp is comparatively understated and under-addressed by prosumers in the context of more celebratory forms of consumption.

This section thereby aims to address the research question posed at the beginning of this chapter that asked, "In what ways, if at all, do Yelpers use consumer-reviewing as a political project?" In doing so, the following research contrasts the dominant mode of discursive framework on Yelp of *customer consumers* to identify moments in which Yelpers transcend this framework to address and/or argue for some type of social, cultural, economic and political change; specifically, this section analyzes the range of activities and utterances that embody or engage in the politics of consumption. For this portion of the study Micheletti's (2003) definition of political consumerism and Jubas's (2007) "six R's" of democratic citizenship were used to help point to moments in which reviewers engaged their consuming selves as citizens and activists. By infusing their roles as consumers with some degree of civic virtue, these prosumers

introduce *counter-discourses* that utilize the review space for the articulation of rights, responsibilities, resources, recognition, residence and resistance.¹⁰²

Scholars of consumer-citizenship have noted that the strength of political consumerism lies in its diversity (Daunton & Hilton, 2001), which aptly characterizes counter-discourses on Yelp. There is no single “preferred” politicized issue on the site. For example, in strictly quantitative terms, only *one* review in all 1,972 takes up the issue of disability rights in a review that criticizes a suburban doctor’s office for not being handicap accessible; similarly, there also exists only one explicit endorsement of universal rights to healthcare, which is somewhat surprising given the debate’s popularity in contemporary public discourse.¹⁰³ The closest Yelp gets to an organized consumer movement appears in discourses that urge others to “buy local” or engage in socially responsible shopping. After explaining and evaluating each of these below, I then follow with a brief “case study” of one business listing dominated by politicized discourse. Implicit to this section is also a demonstration of the myriad ways that Yelpers engage in ideological critique discouraged by the site’s architecture and Content and Review Guidelines.

Buy local. One of the most common forms of consumer politics on Yelp relates to the “buy local” movement. “Buy local” discourses appear in diverse incantations across the site, again demonstrating the various levels of discursive agency and critique brought to consumer reviewing. Some reviews explicitly encourage consumers to shop locally or celebrate the act of consuming locally as a worthy action or form of “good citizenship.” However, “buying local” is also presented as just another business feature, suggesting that the “local” is an inherently *positive* quality without an explanation of what those benefit are exactly. In these instances,

¹⁰² Even where not explicitly noted, all six aspects appeared at various points across the sample with some degree of overlap.

¹⁰³ In this case, the review simply states: “People ask me why I am such an advocate for universal single-payer health care. Part of it is because I feel that everyone should have access to a doctor like Stephen Brown.”

“localism” is a term primarily used for descriptive, not agitative, purposes that in turn, contributes to Yelp’s general usefulness (*utilitarianism*) and consumerist framework (*celebration of consumption*).

The “buy local” discourse appeared most frequently in reviews for the “Food” category.¹⁰⁴ In most cases, however, Food reviewers across each community limited their invocation of the “local” to describe desirable but *apolitical* qualities of a business or service that modified other utilitarian descriptions such as product availability and selection. For example, “local” as a modifying adjective occurs in the following three comments taken from three separate reviews of rural restaurants: “Most importantly, this is the best place around our area to eat fresh and local;” “We liked: local focus;” “Lots of local art on the walls and the place is bright and comfortable. It feels like a real locals place.” In all three cases, the local is ambiguous and unexplored but presented as a central quality of what the reviewer “liked” about a business. Many of these reviews also combined the use of “lovemarks” with a “shop local” message. For example: “There's something appealing about supporting the small, locally member-owned food stores that appeals to me;” and “Support this locally-owned organic store!!!!” Other reviewers expressed a general sentiment towards the local with: “I love local businesses!” While these expressions could be seen as politically motivated, there is never any reference as to why “local” is a desirable characteristic to support in the first place. Though neither explicitly political nor inherently depoliticizing, lovemarks of the local are ambiguous in meaning and intent. However, as expressions of *responsibility* (Jubas, 2007), they are in a sense bridging the duties and commitments of citizens to consumption practices.

¹⁰⁴ Although this makes sense given the context of the growing popularity of global food politics in recent years, it is also suggestive of the site’s preference for the review of consumerist or private consumer activities (e.g., eating).

Lovemarks seem less ambiguous when contrasted with direct and “politicized” expressions of localism that appear across a number of reviewers that turn critique towards specific business and consumption practices. One of the more common ways that the local is politicized is through attention to issues of *production*; in these cases, “buy local” is used to endorse businesses that use or sell locally-sourced goods (e.g., food, beer, meats, produce) or those “homemade on the premises.” These reviews occurred most commonly for independently owned coffee shops, farmers markets and food co-operatives (although exceptions do exist). Examples of reviews referencing local food sourcing stated: “Local pasture raised meat/ local produce in their tasty panini's;” “It's nice to know where your meat is coming from (Lancaster, PA);” and “Currently most of the produce is shipped from other states/countries. I don't know if that will change as summer rolls but more local would be great.” Negative business critiques were often justified by a business’s *failure* to use locally sourced products or ingredients: “The only reason they're not a 5 [star] are the lack of real farmers (I stole this from someone else's review, but it's so true... I see no sign of legit farmers);” “Food is really good but it loses a star because I recently found out that the pies they make are not made on premises anymore.” Comments that endorse local food production and local sourcing can be understood as using the politics of consumption to express notions of democratic citizenship; in their most politicized form they suggest not only *rights* to a healthy environment but a *responsibility* of citizens to their local communities (Jubas, 2007). Additionally, endorsing local production and food sourcing promotes sustainability of local *resources*, although these notions of democratic citizenship are never explicitly articulated in reviews.

Endorsements of the local are not limited to Food listings but appear in the Health/Medical and Government/Public Services categories as well.¹⁰⁵ While it may seem strange to lobby for localism in the Medical category (i.e., most doctors and dentists are “local” or independent), this is changing in the face of consolidated, privatized healthcare networks. The few existing expressions of localism and rights to healthcare resources in Medical reviews figured most prominently in the urban Medical sample with nearly all political critiques originating from a single Yelp reviewer. This reviewer, Darren W (aka “Proletarian Steel”) politicizes the healthcare debate in his reviews by challenging the structure of the city’s consolidated medical complex through a one-star critique:¹⁰⁶

UPMC is one giant, monopolistic monster on the loose and is a perfect example of how immoral the medical/industrial complex is... Yeah, non-profit my ass. At least pay taxes. I don't care how many people you employ (then lay off after upping a head count). UPMC cares about its bottom line, period. Everything else is immaterial to it. USP is the UPMC's Ultimate Nullifier. Hopefully, someday this Galactus of corporate healthcare will fall, and it can.

Here, Darren W equivocated privatized healthcare to big-box retailers. Implicit to this critique is that the city’s hospital conglomerate no longer represents the interests of local citizens (e.g., it does not pay taxes like everyone else). In doing so, he is a lone voice amongst the listing’s three other “five-star” reviews which focus primarily on the standard consumer experience of quality service, amenities, and accommodations.¹⁰⁷ His structural critique points out the flaws of neoliberal political economic policies (a key factor in the systematic consolidation and

¹⁰⁵ The Medical category notably featured more reviews from local residents review than tourists, ex-residents or non-locals, which is not necessarily the same for Food and Government/Public Services.

¹⁰⁶ Darren W’s personal Yelp tagline featured on his profile page also invokes a Marxist orientation: “Working Class Headbanger Saves The World...From Itself!!!!”

¹⁰⁷ Darren is also unfortunately called to change his tune several months later in his review of a related hospital when his father is admitted to the emergency room with a blocked stent. He responds on Yelp within the same evening, writing entries that personally thank the emergency responder at 911 and the doctors and nurses *by name* at the hospital (part of the hospital chain) for saving his father's life. “Again, thank you all. You're still a top-flight facility despite being overtaken by the for-profit Goliath that is UPMC.”

privatization of “corporate healthcare”), and is a vastly different approach to consumer-reviewing than those written by *customer consumers*.

Reviewing local businesses and services against corporate competitors or chains is a common rhetorical strategy used across all three categories as a way of promoting the “buy local” movement. For example, in the urban Government category reviewers discuss their preference for libraries and non-profit radio over their corporate counterparts: “With DVDs and VHS tapes and new and old books, why go to Netflix or Barnes and Noble?”¹⁰⁸ and “No record companies or big businesses breathing down the deejays’ backs here, for a change.” Similarly, reviewers in the Food category frequently incorporate the “chain versus local” rhetoric to promote local consumption, oftentimes celebrating specific businesses as “local institutions.”¹⁰⁹ Several examples of this include, “Since my BF’s home is equidistant from here as well as the Starbucks in Media, I’d rather patronize a local venue where local artists adorn the walls and the glass is posted with the latest in local happenings and culture;” “So skip the Dunkin Donuts next time you need a caffeine fix and try the imported flavors at the Co-Op;” “I cannot understand why someone would prefer a Starbucks or another national chain to a small operation like the Coffee Club.” This type of comparative reviewing and direct endorsements that invoke national chains as negative comparisons is a frequent rhetorical strategy aimed promoting local consumption opportunities and resources; of course, it is also true that reviewers will often quantify a preference for the local option over chains only in the case of “all other things being equal” (e.g., quality, selection, atmosphere, price). Moments do, in fact, arise when a competing chain is presented as a more favorable option.

¹⁰⁸ An inordinate number of library reviews serve to promote alternative forms of local consumption and access to local resources.

¹⁰⁹ Strangely, while all three food categories promote the local through a negative-other comparison of the “chain,” only the urban invokes the terms “corporate” or “corporations” in their reviews.

In the effort to promote the consumption of local resources, reviewers also frequently include short detailed histories about the establishment or its historical relationship to the community itself. As a rhetorical strategy, this information serves to connect readers to the establishment and facilitate an understanding and affiliation with the business or service. At times, such histories aim to play an integral role in the appeal to readers. For example, Yelp user “Susan D” offers a brief history of Andrew Carnegie’s life and role in developing Pittsburgh’s local library system to set up her endorsement for the public funding of local libraries.¹¹⁰ She begins by acknowledging that despite his “checkered” reputation amongst workers, Carnegie was committed to “literacy for the common man.” She explains the history lesson in her review as having two purposes:

First of all, the old Carnegie location in Hazelwood (like so much of Hazelwood) is endangered. It was abandoned in deplorable condition. But its historic value is important because it was one of the first neighborhood locations built by Carnegie. The building has beautiful woodwork book stacks, and a 250 seat auditorium that was in use by the neighborhood up until the building closed. That auditorium could be used again. So much of Hazelwood has been [sic] abandoned and lost. But second of all, libraries themselves are endangered. State funding has been cut and libraries have been forced to cut staff, services, and hours. The CLPGH is considering closing many locations, including the new Hazelwood one. Think libraries aren't important in an era of Kindle, I-pad, & the internet? They provide many services you can't get elsewhere. As one local resident said, 'If you're gonna close libraries, you'd better start building jails.' How are we supposed to combat illiteracy if we keep closing libraries. Yeah, I did get on my soapbox here...

Susan D uses the review space for a 500-word exposition on the history and importance of local libraries, encouraging readers to see the value of local library systems. She points out the value of libraries as a citizen *resource* grounded in the *right* to information (this appears earlier in the review and is not quoted here). What is interesting about her review, however, is how Susan D limits her critique to description rather than agitation; while it certainly bridges civic and

¹¹⁰ Susan D’s personal profile indicates her political orientation with the slogan: “To the WI State Employees: Just Follow Your Heart/The Revolution Starts NOW!”

consumer issues (if only through its appearance on Yelp), at no point does she propose any form of direct activism, civic response or political action. Alternatively, similar concerns over state budget cuts appear in another library listing, in which the reviewer states: “I’ve been happy to write to my government officials to ask them to support this treasure.” While these two expressions of consumer-citizenship are articulated in different ways, they demonstrate the platform – the “soapbox” – that Yelp provides local community members to bridge their citizen and consumer identities towards productive ends.

Social responsibility. Socially responsible consumption is a second form of consumer politics that appeared throughout many Yelp reviews. Social responsibility takes up a variety of production-related issues including, ecological, environmental, labor practices and improving social justice.

Like the “buy local” rhetoric, discourses of social responsibility range in type and intensity; reviewers promote “socially responsible” consumption as a modifying adjective in more utilitarian descriptions of product offerings, or to make direct and politicized endorsements of alternative consumption practices. In the former, qualifying a “socially conscious” business takes the form of: “[They do a] great job of serving interesting, globally-conscious, well-made coffee and espresso” and “Five stars because...Socially Responsible. Fair trade coffee.” Notably, many of these more “descriptive” reviews tend to reinforce ethical consumption as a trend than a long-term political project. For example, there is some irony to praising a local organic store for being “eco-friendly and full of products,” as is the claim that: “I’ve found cheap, beautiful berries here in the middle of winter, as well as oranges that make me drool.” As far as socially responsible shopping goes, these statements do not necessarily make “ecological sense” in terms of sustainability or environmentally-friendly sourcing techniques.

More direct and informational endorsements incorporate details about ownership and business practices, such as this review of a locally-owned urban coffee shop:

Voluto is a genuine local, independent, fledgling, environmentally-responsible women-owned business. I really hope they stay around for the long haul. Penn Avenue and all of [Pittsburgh] is the better for it... what's especially awesome about Voluto is how committed the owners are to sustainability. Everything, from their light bulbs to their reliance on fair trade sources and their preference for all things organic is thought through.

In other reviews, the presentation of general business information is used to inform readers about how to participate in socially responsible practices *through* their consumption at a particular establishment, such as this review from an urban grocery store where “They reward you for using your own reusable bags with a raffle ticket for a grocery prize.” In a review of Planned Parenthood (urban, Medical), Darren W urges a different kind of responsibility to the self and others, positioning sexual health as a public issue. Interestingly, it is also Darren W who writes *three* of fifteen reviews for the local urban Port Authority in which he promotes public transportation as an accessible and socially responsible practice, stating: “[I]f it's not too inconvenient for you to take a bus, please try it. There are too many damn cars on the road. Give the Earth a little breathing room and walk off some pounds.” Additionally, he also extends the notion of social responsibility outside of Food politics in his reviews for local non-profit organizations in which he urges consumers to act as responsible citizens by making charitable donations to the poor.¹¹¹

As demonstrated, moments of consumer activism occasionally disrupt Yelp's consumerist-orientation.¹¹² However, these moments are typically spread out across a wide

¹¹¹ Like Susan D's library review, he also appeals to readers through a detailed local history and narrative of the organization and its founder.

¹¹² It is worth noting that across all nine samples, Darren W's reviews offer the most direct and confrontational political critiques of any Yelp member featured; as the most *consistent* “consumer-as-activist” reviewer, he is thus largely an anomalous figure on the site. For Darren W, expressions of consumer-citizenship (particularly, lobbying for rights, resources, responsibility, recognition and issues around residence) occur in a majority of his reviews. This

number of entries; this makes expressions of consumer-citizenship easier to overlook than if the reviews for an entire listing centered on political issues of local concern that specifically related to a single business. However, where a politics of consumption is discursively concentrated into one listing, readers are, as a result, situated as a “captive audience” and forced to at least *acknowledge* consumer-citizenship (the only other option being to not read about the listing at all).

In the following section I present a brief case study in which the politics of consumption merge with the rights of citizenship and comes to dominate an entire business listing. In this case, consumer reviews are employed to agitate for political rights, resources and recognition, after being prompted by “offline” news stories that are then responded to in *online* posts. This example demonstrates the possibilities for using Yelp as a platform for political protest and agitation around local issues, as well as the ways users circumvent the site’s “Content Guidelines” in unanticipated ways.

Case Study: Peace, Love and Little Donuts.

As one example of concentrated resistance, the business listing for the popular donut shop (urban, Food) “Peace, Love and Little Donuts” became a space commandeered by reviewers for the insertion of political critique. The independently-owned donut shop, which appropriates a 1960’s counterculture aesthetic of “peace and love” as its brand (the store’s trademarked slogan is “feed your inner hippie”), first came under fire by local consumers *off-site* after the shop owner publicly posted a string of conservative right-wing beliefs to his [*online*] blog and Facebook page. In addition to explicit criticisms of liberal ideologies and policies, the donut shop owner also referred to gays and lesbians as, amongst other things, the “immoral

is not to suggest, however, that he is the *only* consumer-as-activist on Yelp, as previously referenced samples indicate that small pockets of resistance occur elsewhere throughout the site. He is merely the most consistent.

minority” (Belser, 2009). After local bloggers and the city newspaper picked up the story, consumers turned to Yelp as a means of expressing their opinions on the matter.

At the time of writing, the business had a two-and-a-half star rating (out of five) and 19 unfiltered, publicly visible reviews. Fifteen of these 19 reviews were “negative” (one or two stars) and made some reference to the store owner’s political ideology while the remaining four made no mention of the issue whatsoever. Eight of the fifteen negative reviews were explicitly based on the store owner’s politics; for example, “Peace and love -- really? No thanks. I love donuts but bigotry leaves a bitter taste in my mouth;”¹¹³ and simply, “More of the love and peace, please.” Another reviewer utilized his review space to rhetorically acknowledge the complication of whether or not a business’s politics should factor into how a business is rated and reviewed:

[S]o do you review on the owner's political views, or the quality of the product? this is deep for yelp, and i didn't do too well in philosophy....shit. that said, i do not agree with the owners statements, but had given this place 2 stars in my head prior to learning about everything.

However, three months later the same reviewer updated his original two-star review in order to *downgrade it* to a one-star rating with the following comments:

[J]ust read the ‘about this business’ section, and can't even give them 2 stars. the owner mentions why his reviews may be so low, but doesn't offer any explanation or apology. you know what they say about guys with little donuts.....

Interestingly, many of the negative reviews acknowledged the store’s politics but did not explicitly or discernably critique the business because of those beliefs. At times, even seemingly negative reviews ultimately endorsed the business by basing their rating on standard utilitarian review criteria (e.g., quality, value, service). For example, a three-star review (average) reads:

¹¹³ During data collection and analysis, this comment appeared under the business listing’s Yelp page; two weeks into analysis, the review had been “flagged” and filtered.

Yikes! As a visitor to the city I thought that these donuts were delicious and that the owner was so personable! Reading the reviews now kinda makes me wish I didn't spend my money there...Alas, the donuts taste amazing, especially the blueberry donut.

Similarly, a four-star review references the store owner's political ideology but concludes with a rating based on service:

Politics aside, I was helped by an exceedingly friendly staff who offered me samples, talked to me about their store, my life story, etc. I found the whole experience pleasant (and yes I am one of those awful left-leaning types).

Here, the previous two reviewers acknowledge but ultimately deflect the responsibility of consumer-citizenship by buffering the conflict with endorsements of the store's "amazing" and "pleasant" product and service. Meanwhile, a negative review similarly obfuscates the store owner's politics with a focus on the utilitarian criteria of price, value and quality. In this example, the reviewer situates the store owner's politics as bad service and in doing so, rhetorically separates consumption from matters of citizenship:

I don't want to have political chat when trying to get my donut grub on and don't want to hear crap about how corporate america [sic] is taking over and the new giant eagle in robinson has copied....blah blah bla blah bl blah! Shut up man! Oh and they are overpriced. The thing is they are good but can we get a nice donut shop in the strip where we don't have to hear about this stuff on a nice sunny morning. Come on now.....WTF!? Please lower the cost and shut the hell up!

In related form, several reviewers also rely on an evaluation of brand aesthetics to point out the irony of denouncing "gays, feminists, abortion, government-based education, and, well, pretty much everything that cute little peace-loving donuts represent." One quasi-sympathetic patron deflects the political critique of others by pointing out that the store's real problem is its brand identity:

It kinda makes the donuts taste bitter. Oh, and Ron, i'm a centrist, 'right to bear..., take personal responsibility...' kinda guy, so don't brush me off as another one of those LGBT radicals trying to keep you down. If your marketing was based on 1950's kitsche, i don't think people would mind you preaching morality nearly as much. seriously, it's the blatantly misrepresentative marketing that especially irks people.

Adding to the discourse is commentary from the business owner himself who did, in fact, respond to a negative review that accused store employees of poorly treating “left-leaning” patrons. In a publicly visible response, the business owner wrote: “This is a bold faced lie... If anyone is unhappy with their purchase, we will gladly refund their entire purchase price. Our service is impeccable.” In an attempt to discredit the other negative reviews on the site he concluded by stating, “Notice these ‘haters’ don’t have pictures on their posts” (evoking Yelp’s theme of “transparency” in the process). His response, however, does not end there; the owner extended blame to “shillers” (i.e., faceless “haters”) for the store’s negative reviews under the Peace, Love and Little Donuts “Yelp for Business Owners” page. Here, he accused the LGBT community of intentionally and anonymously inflating the negative review count. Under the “About this Business” section, he wrote:

The Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual and Transgender community is posting negative comments and doing everything they can to tear down anyone who doesn't agree with them. All of the negative comments are from that source. Please consider that when deciding to try our donuts, thanks.

The owner’s ability to respond to reviews and defend itself on its “About this Business” page is a good example of the access that Yelp’s business tools affords local business owners to level the playing field (see Chapter Three). In this case, Yelp offers the owner of Peace, Love and Little Donuts two separate platforms to delegitimize the negative critiques issued about his business; one, the ability to publicly respond to reviews so that readers can “judge [the situation] for themselves;” and two, control over the Yelp for Business Owners page, which gives the shop a second platform for describing – and defending – its business practices and ideology. As van Dijk (1993) notes, one way of maintaining power and dominance is through *access and control*

over discourse and communicative forms, which is an opportunity that Peace, Love and Little Donuts certainly exploits given Yelp's architectural characteristics.

What is interesting about the counter-discourses present in Peace, Love and Little Donuts as well as the "buy local" and "social responsibility" rhetoric is that they demonstrate the range of discursive political agency that exists on Yelp. In the case study above, two reviewers linked external news stories to validate their claims, others pointed out the irony of using 60s counter-culture to sell donuts (demonstrating in the latter instance a degree of consumer savvy oftentimes overlooked in critical theory), while numerous reviewers altogether ignored politics and celebrated the quality and service. However, across this range Yelpers discursively connected ideology with consumption, reinforcing the relationship between them so that other conscientious consumers participate in the boycott.¹¹⁴

In the above analysis I have attempted to foreground a counter-discourse around the politics of consumption by *citizen consumers* (or *consumer activists*) that extends beyond the empowered consumption of *customer consumers*. Again drawing from Cohen's (2001, 2003) historical research, I appropriate her term of *citizen consumer* as a means of identifying consumer-reviewers who "take on the political responsibility we usually associate with citizens to consider the general good of the nation [or local community] through their consumption" (p. 204). In its most agitative form, I also suggest the term *consumer activist* more aptly applies to those who not only *consider* the "greater good" in their consumption practices, but who take it a step further through Micheletti's (2003) version of political consumerism by calling for direct action. For example, there are those that describe and critique a business or service on political or

¹¹⁴ Furthermore, Yelpers can, theoretically, take this discussion "backstage" to the Talk threads if and when Yelp administrators decide to remove reviews that fail to reflect "the normal customer experience." However, the problem with relying solely on Talk threads as the site's only "free" space is that it forces the conversation into the insular world of "Yelper members only" – a community space in which the average "lurker" is less likely to visit, search for, and contribute.

socially relevant grounds (*citizen consumers*) but there are also those who call aim to redress certain issues through agitation and political or civic engagement (*consumer activists*).

In the search for the political possibilities of consumption, however, it is also important not to delude ourselves; thus, it important to acknowledge that while endorsements for alternative forms of local and socially responsible consumption exist on Yelp, albeit infrequently, these utterances were more often than not limited to *descriptions* of businesses, services and product offerings rather than direct *agitations*. As explained, this frequently occurred via celebrations of “the local.” This research now turns to unpacking that term to better understand how it is used by Yelpers as a “political” construct. I have determined that Yelpers write the local into their reviews by endorsing and celebrating local businesses and services; however, what is it about the “local” that consumers find so appealing and empowering? Further, does merely invoking the term necessarily suggest a *politics* of consumption? How are Yelpers articulating the local in their reviews and to what effect?

Constructing the Local

In addition to understanding how Yelpers appropriate the practice of consumer-reviewing as a form of consumer-citizenship, a second set of research questions aimed to uncover how prosumers articulate the “local.” Specifically, what ways do consumer reviews construct or situate “localism” beyond the geographical meaning of the term? An analysis of discourse revealed that localism on Yelp is not merely limited to location – for example, *residence* (Jubas, 2007) – and ownership structure, but on a deeper level, an aesthetic to be *experienced*.

For the most part, Yelpers really like the “local” (although the concept varies from user to user). The number of “pro-local” reviewers is actually quite interesting given that many reviews in the Food and Government/Public Services categories were written by non-locals (e.g., tourists

or former residents now living elsewhere).¹¹⁵ For example, under the “urban Government” sample, two of the most reviewed listings were for the city’s working funicular cars (vertical lifts for transporting people between the top and bottom of the city’s large hills). Of the 72 reviews for both inclines, only 12 reviews were written by local city residents currently residing in the area (although another two stated being former residents).¹¹⁶

However, limiting the “local” to a definition bound by geographic location does not encompass or explain its diverse use and expression; theoretically, if local *only* applied to territory then a physically proximate corporate chain or franchise within city limits could, technically, be considered a “local” business. Beyond location, therefore, *ownership structure* is yet a second way that Yelpers construct the local. The comparative absence of reviews for corporate chains amongst the top-reviewed listings in all nine samples suggests that ownership matters on Yelp. As previously discussed, “local” is almost always discursively constructed as antithetical to corporate chains. Here, discussions of local businesses and services within the context of *ownership* occurs alongside expressions of, “independence,” “community,” “neighborhood” and “mom-and-pop.” At times, some Yelpers allude to ownership structure as a primary determinant of a “local” business - referencing the owner by first and/or last name, or as a “locally-owned” or “independently-owned” establishment.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ One exception to this, however, is the Medical category which makes sense given that few tourists would likely have any use for medical or dental facilities while visiting a particular area unlike food-related businesses or government-run services (e.g., historical landmarks, parks, libraries).

¹¹⁶ Yet despite the large number of non-locals reviewing businesses outside their current place of residence, many tourists, visitors and ex-residents still tend to express a preference for local businesses (while out-of-town) and generally reinforce the sentiment: “I’m happy to support a local place when I can!”

¹¹⁷ Presumably, “independent” infers independence *from* a larger parent company. Defending local businesses against chains, however, varies. Some proponents of local businesses support them over chains even in cases where products might be more expensive; other reviewers will rate chains higher than locally-owned alternatives in the case that not all qualities are equal. For example, a review of a local bagel shop ultimately endorses the chain because it does not compare in terms of service: “The service here is terrible. A glacier moves faster than the line at Bagel Factory and the system is incredibly inefficient, Go to Brueggers down the street if you’re in a rush.”

A third articulation of localism is a bit more ambiguous; here, the celebration of the “local” often serves as a description of neither location nor ownership structure but rather a distinct *aesthetic* or *feeling*. The local is discursively constructed as an *aesthetic* through the repeated use of diminutive terms such as “little,” “small” and “gem” which in context, allude to something low-fi, small-scale or even child-like.¹¹⁸ For example, reviewers frequently describe local businesses in such terms as: “great little shop in a great little town;” “This little spot really is a step back in time;” “love little joints like this - it's off the road, they serve good coffee and breakfast sammies and have a little seating nook;” and “it is a little gem in the town.” While local business may, in fact, be smaller in size than larger chains this is not necessarily always the case – nor is “size” what the reviewer seems to be inferring. For example, practically speaking most Starbucks or Dunkin’ Donuts coffee shops are relatively small in size yet neither are ever described in diminutive terms. Furthermore, beyond an aesthetic localism is also described as a *feeling* which appears in the follow examples: “It doesn't *feel* commercial here at all;” “Definitely a *local friendly vibe* from all its guests;” “Very *neighborly feeling*” [all emphases added].¹¹⁹ It is notable that these statements are made by both locals and visitors alike.

It is my contention, therefore, that the “local” has been discursively transformed into an experiential, consumable aesthetic that conjures up a certain “feeling” of connectedness with a particular place that may or may not actually relate to one’s hometown or local community of residence. Furthermore, this feeling might be produced by any number of things – kitschy décor that elicits an “atmosphere” reminiscent of “simpler times; the social status and familiarity of

¹¹⁸ In rural areas, such businesses are oftentimes described as being “nestled” between two towns, roads, buildings or some other location which conjures a pastoral “old-timey” notion of the past.

¹¹⁹ Local as experiential is not limited to Food reviews. In another review for a local hospital, Darren W criticizes the facility for being “too big”; in this case, the logical question is to ask what a “small” healthcare would look like. Is it necessarily the physical size of the hospital building that Darren had a problem with? Or is it something more ephemeral and intangible that arises out of the hospital’s larger structural organization?

being a “regular;” or even feelings elicited from the reconnection of producers (business owners, management, employees) with consumers. Perhaps it is the accessibility and visibility of production processes – rather than the all-too-familiar absenteeism of corporate owners (and their associated chains-of-command). Due to their small size in scale and scope, local businesses are better able to bridge producer-consumer relations lost to the modernization process.¹²⁰ This might also account for the desirability of local sourcing; consumers can feel *connected* to the production process which produces another level of experience in the transaction and consumption of goods.

For the intents and purposes of this project, limiting the “local” to a vibe or consumable experience abstracts the local as a political term from its active state or practice; in other words, localism’s ability to *reconnect* can ultimately and ironically *disconnect* consumers. As an aesthetic for purchase, then, localism remains a consumable commodity that customers experience within the boundaries of a specific place; this, however, does necessitate, facilitate or require consumers to actually engage in any real local practices beyond obtaining the right commodity sign. More than anything, therefore, localism on Yelp limits this construct to a fashionable *trend*. Localism as a trend is not limited to Yelp, of course, which is at times even noted by Yelpers themselves. As one reviewer writes about a local farmer’s market: “They saw the sense in growing local, buying local, being green, and delivering great service well *before it became a hip trend*. It’s who they are, not what marketing studies and upper management are telling them to be” [emphasis added]. Another reviewer also infers localism as a trendy “mentality,” pointing to the irony of its appropriation by area residents (“Main Liners”): “I guess the Main Liners dig the ‘support local business while driving my ridiculous Range Rover’

¹²⁰ In this sense, the celebration of the local is also historically bound; whereas it may in some part be a form of false nostalgia, it is also possible to read this shift as a critique of post-industrialization.

mentality? Well, could be worse.” Perhaps this partially explains why so few reviewers who celebrate “local businesses” also fail to elaborate on how they actually *participate* in the community beyond the business’s walls; instead, Yelpers are more likely to celebrate the consumption *experience* than to identify themselves as active community agents.¹²¹

Analysis

Consumer-Citizenship on Yelp: Customer Citizens vs. Consumer Citizens/Activists

As I have tried to demonstrate, consumer-citizenship on Yelp is multifarious; it is bound to expressions of identity and empowered consumption in some moments (*customer consumers*) and appears as an explicitly political project in others (*citizen consumers/consumer activists*). Consumer-citizenship on Yelp is, however, largely dominated by expressions of personal taste and personal affect which tend to overwhelmingly celebrate, rather than challenge systems of production and consumption. This is fairly consistent with Yelp’s terms of service, guidelines and architectural design which encourage participation towards consumerist ends. However, Yelpers *do* at times transcend the site’s structural constraints to rhetorically ascribe social and political power to their reviews, or to use the site as a means of political or civic activism (e.g., Peace, Love and Little Donuts). While articulations of the “consumer as customer” appear more frequently than the “consumer as citizen or activist,” Yelp arguably serves as a space where both co-exist, overlap and, at times, collide.

¹²¹ Although it is outside the scope of this project, what is interesting and in need of more investigation is who, precisely, can claim localism for themselves. To consume or *be associated* with “local” is dictated by some degree of exclusivity. In the suburban Food sample, for instance, there are many references to independently-owned vendors across the area’s numerous farmers markets; however, these vendors are generally not articulated as “local” citizens. Instead, the most commonly identified vendors are referred to by cultural or ethnic designations such as “the Amish” and “Asians.” Interestingly, neither Amish nor Asians are ever referred to as locals. Similarly, the urban sample also employs a discourse about “yinzers” which is a term coded with a number of class-based associations. Students are yet another group across all samples that are discursively separated from locals, as evidenced by this comment that distinguishes students from “townsfolk”: “*both students and townsfolk have taken to it like a fish to water. I just hope it can survive being successful.*” Elsewhere, students are referred to as “laptop armies” filling up space, and are largely discussed as an external category in urban reviews, particularly.

As a resource for “empowered consumption,” Yelp enables individuals to empower themselves in the marketplace by providing the resources needed to make good decisions amongst a variety of available choices. This relatively “soft” form of consumer-citizenship marks a fundamental duty assigned by neoliberal consumer capitalism in which one of the most important and pressing obligations citizens have to society is the task of empowering the self privately (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). As a resource containing “Real Reviews [by] Real People,” Yelp provides an efficient means by which consumers can ultimately govern themselves as citizens. By this definition, empowered consumption connects with citizenship through the articulation of “lifestyle politics” (Bennett, 2004), where political and consumer choices are made by individuals on the basis of how they impact or affect one’s personal lifestyle. Lifestyle politics describe a cosmopolitan form of identification in the context of globalization and its resulting systemic dismantling of traditional forms of affiliation – for example, class, religion, political party and even *local community*, which Bauman (2001) alternatively described as a “liquid society.”¹²² As individuals come to construct identities on fragmented niche markets, lifestyle politics has made it possible so that:

ideological messages – particularly about global justice issues – are less likely to be received positively by typical citizens. In this context, effective activist political communication increasingly adopts a lifestyle vocabulary anchored in consumer choice, self-image, and personal displays of social responsibility. In particular, attaching political messages to corporate brands becomes a useful way to carry often radical ideas into diverse personal life spaces... (Bennett, p. 102)

¹²² Bennett summarizes the social and economic changes associated with globalization as including “transformations of jobs, careers, and labor markets; proliferation of new family models with working parents and more independent children; dislocation of civil society organizations such as unions, churches and civic groups; and the collapse of broad opposition ideologies to the reigning neo-liberal faith in market democracies” (p. 103).

In relation to Yelp, this would at least partially explain why more blatant and direct ideological messages promoted by *citizen consumers* read as anomalous expressions. Given Yelp's policy that regards ideological critiques as a content *violation*, it starts to make sense that consumer-citizenship on Yelp appeals more to lifestyle politics than direct forms of political activism.

Similarly, consumer reviews as expressions of lifestyle politics also appears in the articulations of the "local." Despite celebrating local businesses as desirable community resources, most do not note the importance of "local" as explicitly tied to material issues of production, sourcing, and ownership; instead, localism is discursively constructed as a *trend* – a consumable aesthetic that re-situates the local's political potential into consumerism's romantic ethos of individualism, desire and consumer *choice*.¹²³ While Yelp offers a useful resource for guiding one through responsible consumption practices, reviews tend to overwhelmingly read more like a guide for participating in the right kind of taste cultures above and beyond its political possibilities.

As a resource for expressing and engaging in lifestyle politics, Yelp's predominantly consumerist framework has a number of implications. For one, when reviewers think solely as consumers rather than citizen-consumers, external factors – structural, production processes, ownership – are subordinated, obfuscated and go unevaluated in the context of the consumption experience. This most glaringly occurs on Yelp through discourses about the *local* and *service*, which suggests that a negative outcome of a consumer politics limited to *lifestyle politics* is its tendency to reduce consumer-citizenship to the fetishization of commodities. For example, as one of the most prominent "utilitarian" themes, service critiques continuously blame low-level,

¹²³ Though not discussed here, this is also evidenced in the myriad reviews that give accolades for being a real "community" or "neighborhood" business without ever expanding on what this entails, or by noting that an establishment "seems like a place" where one can participate in any number of community practices. Many reviews read more like expressions of taste cultures above and beyond other possibilities.

underpaid and expendable customer service workers for “bad” consumption experience; rarely are employees evaluated in relation to business ownership or the constraints of work environments, even in the context of service accolades. Few reviewers attribute poor service to understaffing, exploitative work conditions or corner-cutting mechanisms by business owners, but rather simply turn critique towards low-level employees (some also blame docents or unions). Two, limiting discourse to the expression of lifestyle politics discourages critical thinking, such as looking beyond the surface for alternative explanations or structural considerations; it solidifies the *genre* of consumer-reviewing, reinforces the “right way” to write reviews, making it more difficult to transcend generic constraints.¹²⁴ Using the example of *service* critiques once again, it is significant that, given Yelp’s capacity for re-connecting producers and consumers in discourses of production, labor issues are only discussed less than a handful of times throughout all 1,972 reviews.¹²⁵

Local as Brand Strategy

Celebrating the local serves as a form of free marketing for small, independently owned businesses which democratizes the reputation of business in the sense that popularity and presence is no longer governed by those who can afford the most visible media buys or Yellow Pages ads. Yelp gives a voice to local, non-corporate establishments that may offer comparable services or products, engage in sustainable business practices, and presumably keep more money

¹²⁴ This links closely to what van Dijk (1993) refers to as a “‘preferred’ mental model” (p. 358).

¹²⁵ Having personally worked in the food services industry for over a decade, this is a particularly salient point to me since in most cases poor service is often less a reflection of a server, bartender, barista or retailer’s competency level than the product of an overworked and underpaid employee negotiating an understaffed kitchen (deemed “expensive” labor, even at minimum wage), overstaffed front-of-the-house workers or long shifts (cheap labor), poor treatment or harassment by business owner (expendable labor). Admittedly, poor customer service certainly exists even in the context of good pay and positive owner-laborer relations; anyone who has experienced the scowls of an employee or a cold plate of long-awaited food by an absentee server can certainly relate to the frustration of a “ruined” consumption experience in which money and time could have been better spent (or the way a mean barista can ruin the rest of your day!). However, opening the dialogue around labor relations in the service industry could also work to redress these types of negative experiences, as well.

within the community, amongst other benefits to society. However, it is also important to note that positive critiques of the local also serves to re-directs discourse away from corporate chains; while the local may be celebrated for being *anti-chain*, such indirect critiques of corporate consumer culture do not necessarily serve as a form of public pressure. Celebrating the local as “anti-corporate” is not a substantial replacement for lobbying governments or urging corporations to adopt better environmental and labor standards – in other words, only focusing on the local allows chains and corporate practices to go uncontested. To this latter point, it is noteworthy that even despite the celebration of the “local” many comparative analyses held local businesses and services to the same standards, services and price expectations of big-box retailers.

Local as an experiential quality, vibe or consumable “experience” threatens to replace localism as an active practice. This is evidenced in the number of reviews that celebrated businesses for being “local” but then criticized these establishments for the very things that *make* them local. For example, in reviews for a local orchard, more users complained about the large number of children present (e.g., community residents) than acknowledged the resources the farm provided these community children.¹²⁶ Similarly, a woman writing about rural restaurant that serves only locally sourced and seasonal food stated: “The whole eat local philosophy makes you feel like you are contributing to something positive” after complaining profusely about the restaurant’s inability to serve lettuce and tomato with her hamburger (the review was written mid-December when such produce cannot be locally sourced). Such expressions demonstrate a form of localism subsumed into the logic of the brand, which poses a number of implications for its sustainability and political potential.

¹²⁶ In fact, nearly a third of the reviews complained about the orchard’s lack of *parking*.

As Jubas (2007) described, *residence* has long been central to the construction of citizenship and so the tactical decision to “buy local” can therefore be viewed as an expression of consumer-citizenship. As exemplified in the reviews above, Jubas also notes that the focus on residence often clashes with other citizen-consumer issues such as the demand for fair prices, affordable goods, free trade and globalization. However, the practice of buying local is one thing; endorsing it without reason or purpose is another. Amongst other reasons, deploying localism as a brand strategy is problematic because it minimizes the role localism plays in the larger political economy. It abstracts the local’s relationship to the larger political economy while obfuscating relations between production and consumption. Furthermore, it does not acknowledge localism as something that requires a fundamental shift in consumption practices (e.g., less is more; do more with less). While Yelp has the potential to reconnect locals to place-based communities, the degree to which this is happening is unclear. The local emphasis on the site seems less about a *return* or *reconnection* to the local as a means of identification and more about promoting a “lifestyle vocabulary anchored in consumer choice, self-image, and personal displays of social responsibility” (Bennett, 2004, p. 102). As a consumable aesthetic and experiential “feeling” politicized by way of integration and display within one’s “personal life space,” Yelp raises more questions about prosumption as a form of local consumer-citizenship than it answers.

In conclusion, the tensions between *customer consumers* and *citizen consumers* are as old as consumer society itself (e.g., Cohen, 2001, Dauntton & Hilton, 2001). Throughout history, these two conceptions have driven a number of debates, federal policies and consumer movements throughout history with the outcomes ultimately siding on one end over the other depending on the social, economic and political context at that time. What makes the politics of

consumption salient *now*, however, is the technological context of social media which affords citizens the ability to forge new public conversations that can effect change at the local level. As demonstrated, Yelp offers the potential for consumer-reviewing to enact larger social, cultural, political and economic changes at the local level but is always in contest by the larger structure and culture of Yelp, as well as its distinct brand of the local.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to argue that Yelp can, in fact, serve as a platform for consumer-citizenship; however, as noted at the beginning of this chapter and in Chapter Two, various *articulations* of consumer-citizenship exist and not all appear equally on the site. Yelpers tend to inscribe critique with a discourse that embodies the rhetoric of *customer consumers* over that of the *citizen consumer* or *consumer activist*. With the exception of anomalous figures like Darren W, counter-discourses and direct forms of political consumerism are largely isolated incidents. In most cases, political expressions and endorsements seem to characterize or promote the reviewer's *lifestyle politics*. Outside issues of identity in which more politically and socially consciousness individuals are likely to express more direct forms of political engagement, political consumerism also emerges when reviewers are prompted to respond to external sources – such as the off-site news stories that exposed the political ideology of Peace, Love and Little Donut's business owner.

In general, however, the overwhelming utilitarian and celebratory nature of consumer reviews on Yelp positions the site as a *useful* resource that consumers can draw upon in order to make more effective, efficient and autonomous decisions as empowered consumers. In this sense, Yelp is favorable to neoliberal discourses of consumer capitalism in which consumption serves as a stand-in for citizenship (Jubas, 2007). By serving as a means for empowered

consumption, Yelp is not so much a space for political consumer activism as it is a resource for consumer-citizens within neoliberal discourses of consumer-citizenship. Finally, while it may seem like I am presenting a binary between “types” of consumer-citizenship, this research does not suggest that consumers acting as *customers* in any given review suggest a fixed identity for the writer. It is quite possible that the reviewer who laments a business for its poor décor and old coffee would in all other cases identify as someone committed to ethical consumption or other social justice issues. Ultimately the goal here has not been to make character judgments about prosumers, but rather to interrogate what kind of discourses and social practices Yelp’s brand of prosumption enables and constrains, promotes and prevents.

The next chapter turns towards users themselves to see how Yelpers who write for the site perceive the practice of consumer-reviewing, particularly as it applies to consumer-citizenship. In order to triangulate some of the claims made about various levels of discursive agency amongst consumers in the previous two chapters, interviews attempt to uncover the degree to which Yelpers find their participation in this web community as necessarily empowering and/or political. Questions also aim to understand the role localism plays in this form of participatory consumption (if at all), and the ways in which membership to Yelp’s online community intersects with or mediates the user’s offline local experiences. The following chapter thereby aims to give voice to those who make up and sustain the Yelp community of reviewers upon which the site depends with the goal of better understanding how reviewers perceive their activity, role(s) and experiences in a way that accounts for Yelp’s distinctly “local” context.

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Chapter Five

Prosumers, Consumers and Citizens on Yelp:

A User Perspective

The previous two chapters have offered a critical analysis of Yelp's promotional rhetoric, site architecture and consumer-generated content in order to demonstrate how structural affordances and constraints enable and delimit the range of discourse brought to the review process. While the dominant discourse on Yelp promotes a rhetoric that articulates *consumers-as-customers*, some individuals have been able to negotiate these power dynamics in order to create a subversive counter-discourse for the articulation of *consumers-as-citizens*.

However, as argued in Chapter Two there are limitations to a study focused on discourse alone (e.g., Mitra & Schwartz, 2001). Concluding with a critical analysis of online discourse fails to account for how these discourses may influence or reflect the behaviors and practices in the real or lived context. Furthermore, focusing solely on texts and architecture forces conclusions and assumptions about how prosumers themselves experience the processes and practices behind generating content and sociality. Thus, this chapter asks: How are these critiques of production/consumption, empowerment/exploitation and consumerism/citizenship experienced or perceived by prosumers? Specifically, how are these experiences or perceptions mediated by Yelp's distinctly "local" context (if at all)? As a second entry point into the debate over prosumption, then, this chapter gives voice to those who make up and sustain the "networked publics" upon which Yelp's very existence depends (boyd, 2007; Varnelis, 2008).

By turning towards a study of users, this chapter begins by addressing the central debate in prosumption studies that asks whether consumer-reviewing is a *necessarily* empowering or *necessarily* exploitative practice. In order to get beyond the standard critiques of labor in the

digital economy, however, interviews with Yelp users attempted to account for the site's distinctly local *context* – in other words, as a site designed around *residential* affiliation (Jubas, 2007). If the “local” can be situated as an element of democratic citizenship (*residence*), Yelp arguably opens up a number of possibilities for the expression of consumer-citizenship and consumer activism. I argue that this approach and its considerations problematizes theoretical studies on prosumption that often fail to account for context, or that treat the virtual and the real as distinct social worlds (Hardey, 2007; Mitra & Schwartz, 2001). As discussed in previous chapters, the literature on prosumption and consumer-generated content tends to dichotomize the practice of producing content as *either* empowering *or* exploitative (see Chapter Two for an extended discussion on this point). However, at times, prosumers reflexively acknowledge the exploitative dynamics of their activities but find that the degree of pleasure derived from their “work” offsets these factors. As Duffy (2010) argues, the fact that prosumers “can and do derive pleasure from their participation...points to the polysemic nature of interactivity” (p. 30). In her analysis of consumer-produced advertisements for Dove's *Real Beauty* commercial campaign contest, Duffy argues that the negotiations between pleasure and power, empowerment and exploitation, suggests that prosumption is approached subjectively but not blindly, and that many prosumers exhibit a reflexive awareness of their activities. However, pointing to the caveat laid out by Andrejevic (2007), pleasure and empowerment are not one in the same. While prosumers may find pleasure, agency and empowerment through Yelp, for example, it is quite another thing to suggest that pleasure *necessarily* empowers or leads to the “destabilizing” of capitalist control.

The following chapter aims to interrogate the practice of “Yelping” along similar lines as both Andrejevic (2007) and Duffy (2010), while extending their critiques to account for consumer-citizenship and the local. This analysis is based on interviews I conducted with 18

Yelpers from across the country between November 2010 and February 2011, and serves to represent their perceptions and experiences as related to me about their Yelp usage. It thereby addresses three interrelated issues aimed at revealing the degree to which Yelpers experience the social practices of consumer-reviewing 1) along the empowerment/exploitation divide; 2) in relation to the politics of consumption within 3) a distinctly local context. To begin, the turn to a user study explores how the site's "prosumers" might be situated along the empowerment-exploitation divide. How do Yelpers recognize and negotiate consumer-reviewing as an empowering or exploitative practice? Upon determining that consumer-reviewing is both a negotiated and contested practice structured by commercial constraints in which many users are inclined to identify with the very policies that create these constraints, I turn towards an analysis of how these same users perceive Yelp's political possibilities for the articulation of consumer-citizenship or consumer-activism. In other words, how do Yelpers themselves understand the political potential of consumer-reviewing? How do they understand this activity in terms of consumer empowerment and agency, if at all? Furthermore, I demonstrate how many of these users willingly take part in delimiting the site's potential through their identification with the site's one-dimensional view of consumption as a discursive practice. Finally, this chapter concludes with a look at how Yelp is shaping users' interactions or relationships with (and via) local *residence*, turning again to Jubas's (2007) conceptualization of democratic citizenship as a means by which Yelp might facilitate counter-discourses of consumption for political purposes. First, however, I will briefly discuss the interview process and design in the following section.

Methods

Data Collection & Sampling

As noted, qualitative studies on computer-mediated communication tend to rely on textual analysis as the dominant research method when it comes to studying websites or web communities (DePew, 2007) which arguably limits the types of claims scholars can make about behavioral motivations, perceptions or social practices in the absence of user/creator feedback. Thus, scholars argue that qualitative digital/Internet studies need to evolve beyond textual analysis, which this chapter aims to do (e.g., DePew; Mitra & Schwartz, 2001).¹²⁷ While textual analysis helps us get at various connections between users, discourse, technology and power (for example), there are other features to consider beyond the artifact produced through communication. What else is there to learn about users themselves, how they perceive and negotiate their practices, and what are the ways in which a local context shapes this interaction?

I originally aimed to create an interview sample based on the same criteria as the analysis of reviews in Chapter Four by interviewing active Yelpers from urban, suburban and rural areas. However, this sampling method quickly proved to be problematic for a number of reasons. On a quantitative level, there are relatively few “active” rural Yelpers; additionally, on a qualitative level the “rural” distinction is somewhat arbitrary given issues surrounding mobility and identification (i.e., the tendency of rural constituents to commute into nearby urban or more populated areas for their sites of work and consumption). A majority of the Yelpers I made contact with also had moved several times since opening their Yelp account, were not living in their original hometown, identified with Yelp communities in which they did not reside, did not like or identify with their current location, or were listed as residing in one place when they in

¹²⁷ Textual analysis as a method of data analysis is not to be confused with textual analysis as a methodology. Analyzing primary texts such as films or architectural spaces is somewhat different from the analysis of secondary texts such as interview transcripts, field notes, observations, etc.

fact lived someplace else (amongst other reasons). These issues complicated the attempt to define “local” users along rural, suburban and urban lines. (As a side note, the transient nature of Yelpers in general may be perhaps another case study in itself.)

Since Yelp is dominant in urban areas, I re-framed the interview sample on the basis of the site’s *diffusion* by recruiting individuals from urban Yelp communities.¹²⁸ In developing this sample, I drew strategically from both the west coast and east coast cities. Selecting both west and east coast participants aimed to account for the how Yelpers experienced the site differently not only by location but by the level of the site’s saturation. Yelp, having originated in San Francisco, is extremely popular (if not notorious) along the west coast. Several of my first few west coast interview participants expressed a belief that for this reason, Yelp was “different” in the west because of its origins there, cultural saturation, and the exceptions that the site’s owners made for Californians over other Yelp communities. Conversely, west coast Yelpers saw the site as still “fresh” on the east coast and thus far enough removed from the “local” ownership politics that site governance was likely more restrictive. Additionally, unlike the west coast there are still many communities on the east coast (and middle states) that do not have local Yelp Elite representation, Community Managers or a vibrant “Yelp scene.”

Taking these distinctions into consideration, I recruited participants from two distinct urban areas from both coasts. These samples allowed me to account for experiences not only

¹²⁸ It should be noted here that I have not disclosed the actual cities selected for this portion of the study as a way of maintaining anonymity guaranteed to participants. Disclosing the actual city would make it easy to search by some of the topics discussed and could thus be easily located with the appropriate search terms. It is also important to underscore that I make no claim one way or another whether or not there is a relationship between the participants interviewed for this study and the reviews analyzed in the previous chapter. Again, suggesting a relationship between both samples would compromise anonymity, as it would not be hard to triangulate claims made by one against the other (if they were, in fact, related). This is an unfortunate shortcoming to Internet studies in that the content one produces cannot be linked directly to the behaviors of individuals and must instead be inferred. Anonymity in some respects compromises the richness of the data but is a necessarily sacrifice for protecting the privacy and identities of participants.

within a single Yelp community but *across* communities, as well. Additionally, multiples sites of analysis allowed me to account for the different political climates that might impact the type of discourse or engagement with consumption that east and west coasters might reveal. Finally, in justifying my sample selection, I wanted to understand “local” as a geographic construct, not necessarily “cultural.” I did not intend for this to be a case study of how “*City X*” uses Yelp locally or to reflect the local politics of *that* particular city but rather, how Yelping and the local intersect more generally. For example, we might presume that the tone and approach to reviewing in Berkley, California may be different than the tone and approach to reviewing in Birmingham, Alabama (although these locations were not part of my sample). Interviewing users from a number of different urban areas thus facilitated what I felt was a more accurate understanding of Yelp use.

In preparing for this study, I registered for my own personal Yelp account in January 2010. I began writing my own local business reviews during that time, and added “friends” from my existing social network, and then later “new” friends that I acquired through the site. The goal of joining Yelp served as a form of *entrée* into the field, a common strategy of ethnographers (Warren & Karner, 2005) that provides a sense of presence or assimilation to the group being studied. Becoming familiar with Yelp as a user proved to be instrumental in helping me learn how the site works (both technically and culturally), but also in gaining access to interviews. Due to the high level of spamming and “trolling” that publicly-accessible Internet sites tend to draw, having a “transparent” profile assisted me in assuring Yelpers I was, in fact, a real person with real (if not necessarily “good”) intentions. Becoming “Yelp literate” also introduced me to the site’s “language” and various social codes, which helped set participants at ease during our conversations; additionally, having some familiarity with the site also

legitimized my intentions and on a practical level, made interviews much more efficient. For example, I could ask about “UFCs” (Useful, Funny, Cools) or “UYEs” (Unofficial Yelp Elite events) without requiring an explanation of what they were; this helped speed conversations along, but also reassured participants that I had a demonstrated interest in their activities. By engaging participants as a mutual “Yelper,” interviewees could be assured that my interests were serious (and not patronizing) which in turn, enabled them to speak more freely about their reviewing activities. This proved to be extremely important for those who were secretive about their Yelping practices, or who did not reveal to many of their “real-world” friends that they regularly engaged on the site.

After receiving approval from the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began recruiting participants through several different strategies.¹²⁹ I started this process by focusing on “experienced and knowledgeable” Yelpers within the east and west coast communities I had selected (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 64); based on my experience with Yelp, I assessed “knowledge and experience” to be anyone with more than five reviews, more than one “friend,” and/or extensive Yelp Talk participation. I also strategically sought out members of the Yelp Elite, designated by a virtual “badge” on the user’s account. I obtained my first interview by contacting “Jean-Luc S,”¹³⁰ a personal acquaintance who has been an active Yelper for the past several years. Upon completion of our interview he recommended that I contact Rajit G, a colleague and prolific blogger from India who had been living in the United States and also Yelping for several years. After interviews #1 and #2, I posted recruitment calls to two Yelp

¹²⁹ See Appendix A for IRB materials

¹³⁰ Participants were guaranteed confidentiality as part of the informed consent as determined by Penn State’s Institutional Research Board (IRB); thus, pseudonyms are used throughout this project for all interview participants. Also, in keeping with Yelp’s style, each participant is also identified with the first letter of their (fake) surname, as well.

community Talk threads – one in a small northeastern city and the second in an urban west coast community. These cities were chosen in part for their convenience (proximity) and richness (user saturation). This particular recruitment strategy, however, proved to be largely unproductive; only two Yelpers responded to the interview calls (one from each location), both of whom I interviewed in person. Posting the interview call to the Yelp Talk threads, however, proved to be a useful and educational experience. While Yelpers from the northeastern Talk thread generally ignored the recruitment posting, Yelpers on the west coast Talk thread showed no mercy with a long strain of snarky, “witty” and at times, mean-spirited responses until finally devolving into a string of inside jokes between local Yelpers (I later came to learn this is a typical response to Talk threads started by “newbies” or non-locals). Upon recommendation from one of the two Yelpers recruited through the Talk threads, I again changed my recruiting methods by contacting potential interview participants *directly* through Yelp’s site’s private messaging service.¹³¹ The remaining interview participants were recruited through this strategy, and with much success. Many of the Yelpers I contacted were eager and excited to conduct the interviews. In addition to Yelpers, I also made a number of futile attempts to contact several local Yelp Community Managers (CMs).¹³² However, despite the fact that their job is to maintain regular correspondence with Yelpers (like myself), I received no response from any of the CMs I messaged for interviews; this led me to believe that paid employees are not contractually permitted to speak on record about their jobs.

In total, I interviewed a total of 18 active Yelpers (n=18) from the east and west coasts. While the range of activity varied between the users, all regularly posted reviews and/or Talk threads and had multiple Yelp “friends.” However, as I quickly learned from the interviews, user

¹³¹ See Appendix B for the recruitment email script

¹³² Community Managers are Yelp employees paid to organize local Yelp communities in urban areas.

activity (real or perceived) could not always be determined by these seemingly logical factors (e.g., total reviews, number of friends, etc.). As I came to learn, participation on Yelp is cyclical for some, regular for others, but defined differently by all; some involved themselves in primarily reviewing, others primarily in the Talk threads. Some Elite members expressed less commitment than non-Elites, and vice versa. In terms of quantifying productivity, however, the number of reviews that participants had at the time of interviewing ranged vastly between five and 2,115 reviews. In terms of Yelp “friends,” the participants interviewed ranged between five to 1,918 friends. Participation in the Yelp Talk threads unfortunately cannot be counted, a functional limitation of Yelp’s search feature. Eleven of the 18 participants were members of the Yelp Elite Squad (although three lived in regions that did not yet have Elite representation, while one other had his Elite status stripped after a disagreement with the local CM). In terms of a demographic breakdown, I interviewed ten women and eight men between their early-20s and mid-40s across a variety of professions.¹³³ Users were not asked to disclose their racial or ethnic identity. The first set of interviews took place with four Yelpers in a small northeastern city (n=5), followed by interviews with six Yelpers from two west coast cities in November 2010 (n=6); the remaining seven reviews took place between December 2010 and February 2011 in an east coast city (n=7). Thirteen interviews were conducted in person, four occurred online in real-time, and one occurred over the telephone. Each participant was guaranteed anonymity and gave their informed consent to be interviewed before the interviews began. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Interview questions followed the same basic semi-structured interview schedule and protocol which I adopted through the recommendations of Rubin and Rubin’s (2005) “responsive interviewing” model for qualitative interviewing which is grounded in an interpretive

¹³³ See Appendix C for a list of participant information

constructionist paradigm.¹³⁴ Responsive interviewing emphasizes three main components: one, the interviewer and interviewee are two human beings who form a relationship during an interview and thus certain ethical considerations are required; two, that the goal of research is about *depth* of understanding, not *breadth*; three, that the research design is flexible and iterative throughout the project's duration (Rubin & Rubin). Responsive interviewing reflects the flexible nature of qualitative research by adapting questions, prompts and responses to the knowledge and interests of those being interviewed. Thus, while the main goal of interviews attempted to better understand the social practices of content creation in the context of local listing sites, a responsive interviewing approach recognized that the path to getting to that understanding often changes with each conversation. Interviews began with questions about their history of Yelp, and then evolved into questions structured around the review process, practices and perceptions of consumer-reviewing on Yelp. I concluded interviews with questions about the degree to which users felt Yelp mediated new or different relationships with their local communities. Where it did not arise organically, I also asked users about their knowledge of Yelp's backstage activity, advertising model and their thoughts on these matters. Finally, interviews concluded with a brief discussion about consumerism and citizenship; specifically, I concluded with two questions to get a better sense of how Yelpers defined these terms by asking: *How would you describe yourself as a consumer? How would you describe yourself as a citizen?* These two questions were not originally a part of my interview schedule but rather were influenced by early interviews and analysis; these additions reflect the responsive interviewing model where "analyzing and interviewing alternate throughout a study" (Rubin & Rubin, p. 16).

Despite the semi-structured question sets, I did not try to prevent deviations from this list and instead allowed conversation to flow naturally. Questions were largely open-ended and

¹³⁴ See Appendix D for a copy of the interview schedule.

interview participants were at times prompted for deeper or more detailed explanations, particularly when it pertained to Yelp's perceived political power or their relationship to their local community. It was often difficult to keep interviews on track as conversations inevitably revolved back to food or discussions that critiqued and celebrated the interviewee's favorite local restaurants. As a result, some participants had difficulty discussing Yelp's political and civic potential for consumer-citizenship. While I did my best to get back to the questions with additional discussion prompts, or by returning back to previous statements the participant had made, there were inevitably moments I had to change the subject altogether in order to prevent frustrating or boring the interview participant. I noted these moments in the researcher memos I wrote immediately following each interview as a way of documenting my feelings and afterthoughts about the interview process. Some of these memos were invaluable in the generation of themes, or in recalling information that participants revealed just before we departed ways after the interview recording had commenced. These memos were treated like data in the data analysis process (Maxwell, 2005; Warner & Karner, 2005).

Data Analysis

Interviews were analyzed using the same methods as outlined in Chapter Four. Additionally, the same sensitizing constructs used in Chapter Four also guided the process of coding and the subsequent development of themes so they will not be reviewed again here. In addition to interview transcripts, research memos were considered in the analysis as well, which also assisted in the development of themes. As mentioned previously, following Rubin and Rubin's (2005) responsive interviewing model, data analysis and interviews were conducted iteratively; while a bulk of data analysis occurred after the 18th interview, early analysis informed future questions and even interview participant selection throughout the entire process.

Findings (Part 1)

Prosumption on Yelp: The Empowerment/Exploitation Debate

The first part of this analysis aims to assess the degree to which users perceive consumer-reviewing as an empowering activity while accounting for how agency is limited by the site's exploitative tendencies. User perceptions of empowerment and exploitation are then addressed in relation to their perceptions and use of Yelp as a site for consumer-citizenship. In doing so, this research aims to *triangulate* conclusions drawn in the previous chapter. In Chapter Four I argued that despite Yelp's overwhelming utilitarian and celebratory nature, the site also serves as a *useful* resource for empowering consumers to make more effective, efficient and autonomous decisions. Interviews with Yelp users discussed below confirm the claims that consumer-citizenship on Yelp is largely limited to a form of *lifestyle politics* in which self-presentation and self-relevance is central to "political" activity. Interviews, however, also aimed to triangulate these latter points with arguments presented in Chapters Two and Three regarding the exploitative tendencies of consumer-generated content. The following analysis thus demonstrates that Yelpers are far more aware of the debates surrounding exploitation than accounted for in most prosumer research; yet despite the asymmetrical relations of power and control that emerge from user labor, most participants seemed to find enough value in their activities to sustain continued involvement – confirming Duffy's (2010) conclusions. To some degree, the ability to use Yelp as an extension of one's *lifestyle politics* is enough compensation to redress the otherwise exploitative tendencies of the site.

The following section thus begins with an analysis of how the participants I interviewed experience Yelp in the context of the empowerment/exploitation debate surrounding

prosumption. I then discuss how these participants experience or perceive Yelp as a form of consumer-citizenship (or its potential as a space for discursively engaging in the politics of consumption) and how consumer-citizenship might account for Yelp's mediation and re-articulation of the local.

Perceptions of Prosumer Empowerment

Interviews perhaps unsurprisingly suggested that Yelp users perceive the activity of consumer-reviewing as not only fun and entertaining but empowering, as well. Despite the fact that consumer-reviewing is, for all intents and purposes, a form of free labor, nearly all of the participants indicated that writing for Yelp has empowered them as both online *prosumers* and offline *consumers*. Additionally, participants reported not only wanting to empower themselves through their contributions, but to empower others as well; users thus distinguished the goals of prosumption as an active practice at the individual level (the self) and social level (extending power to others) (Duffy, 2010). Participants expressed Yelping as a form of personal and social empowerment through the re-occurring themes of *self-improvement*, *autonomy*, *efficiency*, *accountability*, *effecting change* and *reflexive awareness*. Taken together, these themes suggest that many Yelpers take prosumption quite seriously, and find Yelping to be a fun and empowering social practice. Moreover, this form of "empowerment" clearly embodies the rhetoric inherent to neoliberal discourse of the empowered consumer discussed in Chapter Four.

Self-improvement. Participants expressed finding a great deal of value in the site's capacity to serve as a creative outlet for *self-improvement*. Specifically, over half of the participants interviewed found pleasure in the writing process that Yelp requires, and felt it served to improve their written skills, helped them stay mentally "sharp," honed a critical eye, and/or provided an escape from the doldrums of their "technical," "boring," "dry" or mundane

work lives.¹³⁵ Several participants expressed an appreciation for Yelp's capacity to engage them on a creative level that their everyday careers and lives did not. Josh S, a 40-year-old east coast urban social worker explained:

I graduated a long time ago and I haven't had to write critically about anything or make recall so I think it made my brain a little sharper... You gotta write; you get outta school for awhile and for a lot of people with boring jobs, the only time you write anything is the email or the memo. It's all you do! And when I first started Yelping I felt like I was going back to English class like I couldn't write anymore and with Facebook you don't even have to email anymore.

A number of participants had a creative writing background and hoped to someday make it a career. Those with professional writing aspirations in particular expressed that Yelp *compelled* them to write more because it offered not only a free space to do so but also an audience. Almost everyone I interviewed found that positive feedback from other Yelpers encouraged them to write more often. Thus, it is not only the *process* of writing, but the sense of validation from others that drives the goal of self-improvement. As one participant stated:

It's incredibly validating and empowering if somebody contacts you and says 'That was a great review' or you go look at it and go, 'Wow, 20 people found this useful and somebody thought this was funny and cool?' You know, it's a real nice stroke to the ego.

Harnessing Yelp as a creative space to "improve" the self also positions the act of writing as a means of self-expression whereby users can create, control and present a "desired self" (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). A number of writers indicated that they were actually "known for" their writing style or some other means of self-presentation on Yelp (e.g., their technical format, interests, sense of humor). Thus, the writing process empowers users not only via self-improvement but self-expression, as well.

Self-expression, however, also demonstrates the limitations of agency of Yelp. For example, since Yelp's structure promotes a largely positive view of consumption, many

¹³⁵ Descriptions that are put in "quotes" imply a direct quote from one or more participants.

reviewers expressed hesitancy in appearing “too negative” in their reviews. Several Yelpers stated they consciously wrote “positive” reviews to counterbalance their negative reviews (and vice versa) in fear of seeming difficult or non-credible. Writing “too negatively” can also conflict with the capacity to manage one’s personal or professional reputation and associations (e.g., jobs, professional life). Several interview participants stated that they often worried that something they wrote might negatively impact their position in the community, employment prospects or their reputation in the workplace.

Autonomy. Beyond the goal of self-improvement, Yelping also enables users to act *autonomously*, which Benkler (2006) identified as a central feature of networked technologies. In terms of autonomy, Yelpers repeatedly stated that producing *and* consuming Yelp content assists in making informed decisions *on their own*. For example, Yelp enables users to “get to know” a location based on their own personal preferences independent of friends or family with different lifestyles or interests. After relocating to New York City, reading and writing reviews assisted one participant, Mary Beth R, to autonomously explore the area outside the perspective of her father, a longtime resident. Another user with complex health issues reported that Yelp not only enabled her to autonomously navigate the city’s myriad restaurants but provided her with the opportunity to tell others about these experiences and empower them to consume autonomously, as well. In this latter example, Kelly J discusses her history with food allergies and how Yelp has assisted her in finding businesses that can (or will) accommodate her needs:

It’s hard to go out and say ‘I can’t have eggs, and I can’t do this’ and have people look at you like you have five heads. Instead you can go [out] and be like ‘let’s go here, or maybe here, because I hear they’re good about this [dietary issue].’

As a result of her reviewing, Kelly J regularly receives complements, thank-you emails and personal messages of gratitude from strangers with similar allergies or dietary issues, suggesting

the information her reviews provide have effectively empowered others to consume with more independence than possible before.

Yelp also granted several participants autonomy over their social lives, as well. Several of the individuals I spoke with attributed the act of Yelping to the personal discovery of a newfound “social self.” In these instances, users who self-identified as “socially awkward” found that their participation on Yelp mediated the difficult task of forming relationships with new friends that traversed the cybernetic space of online *and* offline contexts. For example, Jessica B, a suburban¹³⁶ east coast reviewer in her early 30s who described herself as “socially inept” and “shy,” explained how her induction into the Yelp Elite motivated her to attend an Elite event alone – something she considered to be completely “out of character.” However, empowered with the resources to act alone, Jessica B resolved that going “stag” is something she now feels she can “do more often.”¹³⁷

Efficiency. As a rich information source about local businesses and services, Yelp provides the functional purpose of helping consumers make “rational” choices (i.e., more/better value per dollar). As producers *and* consumers of Yelp content, nearly all participants expressed that Yelp assists in their decision-making processes so that they can effectively and efficiently make the best possible choices from the range of available options. This ability to make better choices, they explained, serves the purpose of improving upon or *maximizing* the consumption experience. By telling others what to expect, how much money they might spend, or exactly what items to order/purchase, reviewers help *customer consumers* navigate the marketplace as

¹³⁶ Many Elite urban communities include local surrounding suburbs amongst their membership; suburban reviewers interviewed were thus listed on Yelp as being part of an urban community.

¹³⁷ Several other reviewers offered similar stories. Josh S, for instance, also attributes Yelp to helping him overcome social anxieties after using the site’s Talk threads to autonomously create and establish his own local network of friends after moving to a new city. Interestingly, the theme of “social awkwardness” came up numerous times to describe many of the more active Yelp Elite members. Several participants who had attended Yelp Elite events noted that many attendees were “socially awkward.”

[autonomous] rational economic actors. However, while it may seem that the goal of efficiency empowers prosumers only through their own consumption of Yelp reviews, those I interviewed also expressed satisfaction in “being part of someone else’s decision-making.” Participants frequently noted that feedback from other Yelpers incentivized their production of helpful and useful content, and thus the goal of influencing others. As exemplified by Scott S: “You feel like your reviews are helpful...If you get a review that gets tons of comments or compliments you’re happy that you helped somebody either make a good or a bad decision.” Nearly all of the participants I interviewed related stories about personal messages or complements received from other Yelpers that underscored the theme of “empowerment through *efficiency*” – for example, thank-you notes for helping another consumer *save* time, money and aggravation, or for insuring a valuable and satisfactory (low-risk) consumption experience.

Accountability and change. Another theme that arose from discussions about the empowering nature of consumer-reviewing centered on issues of *creating accountability and effecting change*. Quite a number of participants felt that their reviews contributed to a larger discourse aimed at holding businesses accountable to consumers, which echoes the rhetoric put forth by Yelp’s promotional discourse as well as techno-utopian scholarship in general that claims prosumption facilitates a consumer-centric “power shift” (as discussed in Chapters Two and Three). As such, participants described Yelp as a “powerful forum” or “soapbox” for expressing opinions and sharing information about the city in a way that can “really drive business.” While the degree of perceived power held by Yelpers varied, nearly all participants believed their reviews could play some role in holding businesses accountable to consumer demands. As Jean-Luc S noted, “Small businesses often have this attitude that ‘if you don’t like it [then] leave,’ but then they have no accountability and so that’s what Yelp does, it creates

accountability for the small businesses.” Peter M, an IT professional from an east coast suburb, discussed reviewing as a means of disempowering business owners who have long controlled the market: “For years we were at the mercy of the chefs in the area...and I think that’s what pisses the chefs off when they see this because they *know* that if they’re sending out a *crap* product, people are going to talk about it.” With Yelp, he continued, “I can destroy your business with [a review] and it is something that I’m very cognizant [of].” While Peter M’s viewpoint certainly does not speak for all of the participants, he identified his own power as evidenced by the visible changes business owners have made in response to his Yelp reviews. In one instance, Peter M issued a one-star rating for a restaurant he regularly patronized after experiencing what he considered to be exceptionally poor service. In response to the updated rating and review, the restaurant owner subsequently fired the bartender that Peter M had identified by first name in the review. According to Peter M, the bartender “should have seen that coming...because [the staff] *knew* that I posted reviews - I used to post *weekly* up there!” Implicit to this statement is that the restaurant’s staff *should have known* the power that Peter M’s weekly reviews carried, and that their failure to do so came with unfortunate consequences.¹³⁸ In response to this story, Peter M addressed his influence to effect change, noting that the restaurant owner “took [my criticisms] to heart and he went back and he changed it and in response, my reviews changed because my experiences got *better*.”

¹³⁸ After the firing, the bartender sent Peter M a private message through Yelp that explained the impact his review had on the termination of his employment. The message contained both an explanation for the poor service as well as a number of life-threatening comments. In response, Peter M wrote yet another review update for the restaurant in which he copied and pasted the bartender’s email into the review space for the public to see. In another instance, the owner of a local high-end restaurant that Peter M regularly frequented threw him out of the establishment after noticing Peter M had dropped his Yelp review from five to four stars. While nearly all reviewers had at least one story about being contacted by angry or grateful business owners, Peter M seemed to have experienced some of the most aggressive confrontations from business owners responding to his Yelp activity.

In a similar instance, a local neighborhood deli created its own potato salad recipe after Mark S critiqued the menu item as tasting “commercially produced.” The owners responded to Mark S with a private message inviting him back to sample the new product. As he recalled:

So I went in as soon as I could and tried their potato salad but not only did they eventually phase out the [commercially-produced] potato salad with their own [homemade] potato salad, but they were going to name it after me and call it ‘Mark’s Potato Salad.’ And I thought, oh no, don’t do that. But they can’t make enough of it – it flies outta there... They said that people buy like, pints of it and every time I go in there, they’re out of it. So I actually helped a business that way with constructive criticism. And I still feel good about that.

It not simply the act of writing that empowers Yelp users but the perceived impact that reviews can have in effective change. Thus, while Yelp reviews essentially serve as free focus groups for local businesses and marketers, participants generally saw their work as empowering, positive and validating.¹³⁹ In fact, the ability to effect change empowered them to produce *more* reviews.

Thus, while reviewers may be empowered by the perceived impact their expressions can have, interviewees also suggested that “accountability” may be more a matter of *perception* than effectiveness. According to Jean-Luc S, while Yelp does not *formally* hold businesses accountable in any real way, business owners certainly seem to “feel that it does.” This sentiment is evidenced by the at times hostile reactions and unapologetic disdain that many local business owners lodge against the site’s reviewers. A number of participants pointed to the tendency of business owners to *overstate* prosumer power with the belief that “business owners think Yelp is more powerful than it really is.” Supporting this claim, Josh S argued that “the only people that seem to not realize that it’s a conversation and narrative...is the business owners.” While retaining the position that reviews can be powerful, many participants admitted that at times, reviewing is little more than “Internet scuttlebutt.” As an amplified electronic word-of-mouth,

¹³⁹ It is also significant that users only discussed issues of *accountability* in reference to local restaurants. No public or utilitarian services beyond restaurants were referenced in this capacity, reinforcing the culture and discourse of hedonic consumption privileged by Yelp’s site design.

participants agreed that much of the discourse produced across Yelp's reviews and Talk threads were merely "conversations we'd be having with our friends, anyway." Some participants were conscious about the required degree of reflexivity these conversations required, as Kelly J noted: "You need to think about what you're doing...this isn't just your bedroom where you can just rant to your friends."

To conclude, participants generally believed in the collective power of their reviews. Nearly every participant either personally experienced or identified moments in which business owners privately or publicly responded to something on Yelp. Additionally, all but three of the participants had received personal messages from business owners or employees about something stated in a review, suggesting an expectation that the praise and criticisms levied in reviews *do* hold weight.¹⁴⁰ While the participants held conflicting viewpoints on the degree to which Yelping could "make or break" a business, their recognition of Yelp's collective power to create accountability and effect positive change incentivized the production of more reviews.

Perceptions of Labor

Reflexive awareness. Most Yelpers I interviewed acknowledged that they willingly and knowingly produced content for Yelp without pay and in effect, provided free marketing for both Yelp *and* local businesses, as well. Participants repeatedly exhibited a "reflexive awareness" (Duffy, 2010) in our discussions about the exploitative characteristics of the site. As Duffy also found amongst participants in her research on user-generated advertisements, a majority of the Yelpers I interviewed openly discussed their production of content as a form of free labor.

¹⁴⁰ I have also been personally contacted by business owners several times for reviews I have posted to Yelp.

Additionally, it is also significant that most of these statements were raised independently by the participant, not in response to a direct question on the topic or a specific conversation prompt.¹⁴¹

In describing Yelp, participants blatantly acknowledged that “Yelp is a form of free labor” or “free marketing.” Others discussed Yelp Elite as a “marketing function” that gets users to “feel like they can invest more time in the site [because] the site *cares* about you.” However, participants negotiated the labor dynamics of consumer-reviewing in various ways. While most exhibited a reflexive awareness about producing content for free, participants did not shy away from referring to their activities as a “job,” “work,” or describing it *like* a job (e.g., “I feel like I’m a reporter”).¹⁴² Some also justified their refusal to take business owners up on free offers in exchange for reviews on the grounds that they would rather be treated like “the average person,” inferring that their Yelp status had positioned them as extra-ordinary or distinct from the everyday consumer *by means of* their Yelp activity – suggesting, in other words, a “pro-Am” (professional amateur) subjectivity that oscillates between professional critic, amateur hobbyist and everyday consumer (Leadbetter & Miller, 2004).

Such reflexivity may be indicative of just how hegemonic exploitation in prosumption-oriented sites has become, as participants articulated issues of labor and compensation in ways that acknowledged the site’s proprietary, commercial model. For example, some participants acknowledged Yelp’s reputation for extorting ad sales from local businesses but rationalized it as just another “part of business.” Another participant, on the other hand, knowingly situated herself as part of the problem: “Like they’re making millions from us, from our generating this content,

¹⁴¹ However, I did ask each participant about their perceptions of the site’s business model, goals and the personal return-on-investment where it did not organically arise in conversation.

¹⁴² For example, one reviewer discussed his process of reviewing restaurants by stating, “I think lunchtime is sometimes a better time to review a place than dinner; it’s usually a little slower and you can hang out a little bit, watch the staff, watch the other people.” This calculated and strategic explanation of how seriously one reviewer approaches the unpaid task of consumer-reviewing almost identifies what might be considered the type of “best practices” many paid professions rely upon in the workplace.

you know, so why are we surprised? You know? I mean we're a part of the problem, too."

Several individuals expressed that free labor "has never really bothered" them since they had been producing some form of free content on other participatory websites for years prior to Yelp. Others negotiated the labor issue as an unfortunate consequence of the larger political economy in which the writing industry itself has been all but "destroyed." According to Mark S, an aspiring writer, "Every writer would like to be paid for their work [but]...there also aren't many paid writing jobs anymore for reviewing." Affirming this viewpoint, Scott S, another aspiring writer, claimed that Yelp is merely one of many companies that now take advantage of people's willingness to write free content: "You don't have to pay people for what they're doing [anymore] and Yelp is a good example of that." Even outside the dynamics of the writing industry, participants reflexively negotiated their stance on free labor by pointing to the impracticality of financially compensating Yelpers for their content with comments such as, "It'd be nice if they paid people to write reviews but is Facebook gonna pay people to write status updates?" and "I mean how much would they pay us really? Would they share the profits of the website with us? I mean there's so many people, we'd get maybe a penny for a review." Thus, while Yelpers demonstrated a reflexive awareness of Yelping as free labor, they drew upon both normative and practical standpoints with economic justifications that pointed to free labor as the "nature" of participatory web cultures, or financial compensation as a generally impractical solution.

Negotiating unpaid labor. Despite not being paid, many Yelpers, especially the Elite, viewed themselves as the ultimate beneficiaries of their labor. Discussions about "compensation" revealed that many participants actually felt Yelp *did* "pay" them back in a number of material and immaterial ways. The most common form of *material* compensation cited by participants

were the Yelp Elite events in which local businesses and services provided Yelpers with free food, drinks, swag, parties and other goods. However, many Yelp Elites also critiqued the events as inconveniently held on weeknights, nearly impossible to get into and involving an advanced registration and wait-listing process. At least one member earned his Elite status “prematurely” by voluntarily assisting the local Yelp Community Manager at a promotional event. Other material forms of compensation include coupons, discounts, or free meal and drink offers from business owners themselves who often personally solicit popular reviewers through Yelp’s private messaging service; in these cases, business owners contact Yelpers to offer complementary services as a means of generating buzz for their business, new positive reviews, or redressing grievances expressed in negative reviews (these offers are not sanctioned by Yelp). More than half of the participants I spoke with had been personally invited to a local business establishment for a free or discounted meal, drink, spa treatment or other service because of their reviews (all participants declined on ethical grounds).¹⁴³

In terms of *immaterial* compensation, participants viewed positive feedback as the most common and valued form. Nearly all of those interviewed stated that the positive feedback they regularly earned from other Yelpers *and* local businesses legitimized and valorized their productivity on the site. Positive feedback encompassed expressions of gratitude, complements, anonymous “Useful, Funny, Cool” ratings (“UFCs”) on their reviews, and other encouraging

¹⁴³ Nearly all participants had a clearly defined “code of ethics” that they employed for the purpose of accuracy and fairness. Scott S discussed his conscious attempt at fairness: “So there’s this sort of ethics that I have in it? Like a morality to it? That like, in my mind is very consistent and I’ll actually totally change things and remove reviews that I think don’t live up to it?” Speaking to this point, other participants believed that reviewers offer “constructive criticism,” “generally use their power benevolently and carefully,” are “thoughtful and balanced,” and write “honestly” and “responsibly.” As part of their ethical code, a number of participants claimed that they would almost always visit a business more than once before issuing a negative review; others claimed to tactically avoid “ancient history” reviews (i.e., reviewing places they have not recently patronized) or to “soft peddling” negative experiences with some kind of positive feedback

words. When asked about what Yelp gave him in exchange for his reviews, Mark S discussed the site as being one of the most productive and creative outlets for which he had ever written:

There's more to writing than whether or not you're getting paid to do it...I guess if it were for a magazine or something [it would be different]. Again, it's a social networking site, it's a review site. I don't think I've ever gotten more positive feedback from writing and expressing myself than I have anywhere else. And I think that's worth more than a check.

Additionally, users also felt compensated by other intangible rewards made possible by Yelp's interactive structure and social networking opportunities, such as new friendships and an expanded social network. As Josh S noted, "I made a bunch of friends with the help of Yelp. They set up the sandbox, you know?" Notably, the most common immaterial benefits that validate prosumption are social in nature.

Contesting unpaid labor. As identified previously, Yelpers approached their position on free labor with reflexive awareness; prosumers *negotiated* Yelping via material and immaterial forms of compensation, but at times reflexively *contested* this exploitative relationship, as well. For example, Yelpers frequently expressed frustration with the site's ambiguous content policies used to justify the removal of reviews or Talk threads, and admitted to consciously resisting the site's structural limitations and constraints. Several participants appropriated the site's architectural features and infrastructure for their own purposes. Ken D, for instance, opened his account in 2006 as a means of taking advantage of the site's free photo hosting – a feature that few Web 2.0 sites at the time offered; Ken D now hosts over 14,000 high-resolution digital photographs on the site's server space. Additionally, he also regularly uses Yelp's "Events" category and Talk threads as a promotional tool, posting mass invitations for personal social outings or fundraisers unrelated to Yelp. Other reviewers also have found their way around some aspects of Yelp's terms of service agreements in order to reproduce and repost reviews that the

site removed or filtered for content violations. In most cases, participants had strategic ways of preventing their posts from being taken down. Ellen K, an urban east coast unemployed IT professional, used her knowledge of filtering technology to “sometimes break their algorithm” in order to subvert the removal of her reviews.

Yelpers also circumvent the structural limitations imposed by the company’s Terms of Service and content ownership policies. For example, some participants maintain personal backups of their reviews to preserve them in the event Yelp ever goes out of business, while those with writing aspirations are cognizant of what they will and will not publish to the site. Speaking to this latter point, Scott S exhibits his reflexive awareness of Yelp’s ownership rules:

I won’t include anything in these [reviews] that I would use in my own writing that I would try and get published. 'Cause you lose your copyright when you post things online I would never write anything on Yelp that I would eventually want to use for anything else because I know it doesn’t even belong to me when I write it on Yelp.

However, while prosumers on Yelp may believe their productivity is valorized by a number of material and immaterial benefits, or that they are subverting or appropriating the site for their own benefit, participants also indicated that they might be putting in far more of their own labor-power than the material and immaterial returns paid out, as discussed in the following section.

Prosumption as Exploitation

The perceived benefits of participation on Yelp parallel those reported by Andrejevic (2007) in his case study of an online television fan community of viewers who write snarky critiques of popular TV programs. In his study, Andrejevic found that while the site’s consumer-viewers felt they reaped a number of fulfilling benefits from their unpaid work, at the end of the day user participation still “doubled as a form of free labor for producers” that reproduced an *asymmetrical* relation of power between television producers and the viewer-consumers (p.

142).¹⁴⁴ Thus, for all of the reflexive awareness, negotiating and contestation involved in rationalizing their unpaid labor, Yelpers produce far more value than the site could qualitatively or quantitatively return (or even produce for itself). While Yelp Elite members claimed to be compensated with Yelp-sponsored parties (never mind the difficulty of getting *into* them), Penny E claimed she often felt “obligated” to write a review *about* the event the next day. The “Elite event” reviews inadvertently function as a promotional piece for not only Yelp but the various vendors that supplied the party’s goods and services.¹⁴⁵ In other word, Elite parties do not come without additional work on the part of Elite members. Maddie T felt like she had to review *more* as an Elite member, stating: “If they’re going to give me the status I should, you know, step up the activities.”

While reviewing each Elite event is enough for some, other Elite members discussed feeling an obligation to later independently patronize the local businesses that sponsored the Elite events they attended. In doing so, the Elite members not only spend their own money on such experiences, but then often feel obliged to produce *more* reviews – this time, for the actual Yelp business listings.¹⁴⁶ As one reviewer rationalized, “You’re giving back. They gave to you,

¹⁴⁴ According to his study, fans produce producing snarky and critical commentary about popular television programs not only in hopes of getting producers and writers to make better TV, but for the entertainment of other viewers on the site. Like Yelpers, many of the participants in Andrejevic’s fan community offered suggestions, commentary and critiques of televised programming and believed that their feedback made some difference. Also like Yelpers’ perceptions of their own labor, these prosumers believed that online fan sites held television producers “more accountable to viewers” (p. 140). For many members of this online fan community, participation on the website actually *increased* their television consumption and that it made television more entertaining to watch. In addition to increased TV consumption, the productivity of viewers in critiquing popular television actually created the conditions for producing content of significantly better quality than the “raw material” on which the critiques are based.

¹⁴⁵ Another Elite member noted that the local Community Manager often personally messages attendees reminding them to review the event on Yelp, making it a difficult task to escape.

¹⁴⁶ Again, Yelp Elite events have their own review listing. Elites are discouraged from writing about vendors who supplied goods and services for Elite events on the actual vendor’s business listing page. Independent reviews of the actual business can only be posted to the business page when experienced outside an Elite or Yelp-sponsored event. While this may be in part to maintain transparency, having a separate Yelp Elite event review space also follows in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission’s 2009 ruling that requires online content producers (e.g., bloggers, consumer-reviewers) to disclose free gifts or connections with advertisers.

you give to them.” In other words, Yelp Elite parties not only incentivize Yelpers to produce a review of the event, they also encourage additional consumption of goods and services at “Yelp-sanctioned” venues, which in turn, produces yet another set of reviews. In effect, a single Yelp Elite party can incite one member to produce multiple reviews and consumption experiences from an event formally designed to function as “compensation” for standard Yelping practices.

The incentive to “give back,” as stated by an Elite member above, extends beyond just reviewing and consuming at local participating vendors; it is also deemed a central expectation of *earning* and *maintaining* Yelp Elite status. Obtaining Elite status is premised on one’s level of activity which is somewhat arbitrarily weighed by total reviews, complements and “UFCs” received from other readers. Once “Elited,” members are also encouraged via personal message from the local Community Manager to “be active in your Yelp community” by not only reviewing businesses but by *issuing* UFCs and complements to others. Elites must also follow Yelp’s expected participation guidelines or risk losing Elite status (at least one participant I interviewed lost his Elite status for challenging Yelp’s review policy with the local Community Manager). Elites are also asked to “recommend” or locate other potential Yelp Elites, effectively offsetting labor onto the site’s most productive and ostensibly “in the know” users.

In addition to producing content in the form of reviews and sociality (e.g., through Talk threads, complements, UFCs, new Elite members), Yelp members also maintain general administrative upkeep for the site. Yelpers regularly engage in “flagging” content that violates terms of service agreements – particularly reviews posted by those believed to be corporate shills.¹⁴⁷ A number of participants mentioned that they frequently create and add listings for new

¹⁴⁷ Interestingly, each Yelper I spoke with had their own mechanisms in place for identifying shillers and therefore did not feel that shillers or trolls necessarily compromised the integrity of the site. Further, the site’s more loyal users (usually, but not always, Yelp Elite) actively police reviews and Talk threads for potential shillers in their

or small businesses that do not appear on the site, while others regularly edit the listing's contact information, hours of operation, web address, uploading photos or assigning appropriate search categories in attempt to make the site function more efficiently. At least two members discussed voluntarily creating content for smaller communities on Yelp where the site had not yet become popular. Ellen K, for example, disclosed that she frequently writes "ancient history reviews" for businesses and services in a small Pennsylvania town where she attended college. When I asked her what compelled her to produce content for a place she has not lived in decades, she matter-of-factly exclaimed: "There is no content! We need someone to generate content!" Others justified the generation of content as self-beneficial. Scott S, for instance, found the task of uploading business information to be generally useful for later searches, but also felt that his work helped him gain personal favor from site administrators who are now more willing to address other issues he brings to their attention.

However, this kind of surplus labor also served as a form of self-promotion or "personal PR" for some users as a way of "getting noticed." Mark S, for instance, writes prolifically in areas outside his local community as a way of drawing out-of-state (non-local) readers to his profile and reviews, while Ken D continuously uploads photographs (e.g., of menus, food items, storefronts, Yelp Elite parties) as a means of drawing new people to his profile and reviews, as well. In both instances, the work of personal branding embodies "hope labor" – using prosumption as public relations in the *hope* it serves as a platform for future careers, temporary job prospects, or material compensation (i.e., being "discovered," landing a paid position). However, in the pursuit of recognition hope labor continues to produce value for a site that materially benefits above and beyond what it returns.

spare time. Thus, Yelp Elites in particular are a structural way of circumventing untrustworthy content because it requires a lot of investment not just in reviews but also on Talk Threads, going to parties, etc.

Rationalizing exploitation. Many of the participants I interviewed even went so far as to *rationalize* the lack of compensation on ethical grounds. For example, Peter M expressed that he was in fact “uncomfortable” with the free food, drinks, goods and services proffered at Yelp Elite parties. Others spoke about their standard practice of declining personal offers of complementary meals and services, while at least one reviewer *removed* a review at the request of the business owner as the “ethical” thing to do. Users frequently draw upon their personal “code of ethics” when turning down compensation. For example, Josh S felt strongly against using Yelp as a space to promote his wife’s business and elaborated on the conflict of interest he saw in even *recommending* his wife’s services to other Yelpers despite her reputation as “the best hairdresser in town.” Thus, Josh S refuses to comment when Yelpers ask for salon recommendations on the Talk threads (which they often do), and instead allows other local Yelpers to recommend his wife’s services. Josh S rationalized this decision by stating, “I don’t think it’s ethical; it’s not ethical. Because then why shouldn’t the restaurants write reviews of themselves? Because if I’m going to complain about restaurants advertising, I don’t like to do it.” He went on to say that in exceptional cases, he might recommend his wife only through Yelp’s private messaging system but would never endorse her publicly in the Talk threads because “for some reason that feels like I would be doing advertising you know, and I wouldn’t want to do that.”¹⁴⁸

It is significant that Yelpers negotiate unpaid labor as an *ethical* issue even in conditions where they stand to materially or immaterially benefit at no material or immaterial loss to Yelp. In some ways, the desire to avoid conflicts of interest suggests the seriousness with which

¹⁴⁸ The general sentiment amongst those I interviewed echoes Josh S’s feelings. Only three participants acknowledged that they had ever written favorable reviews for businesses owned by friends or family, and at least one of those three claimed he now consciously refrains from shilling.

prosumers approach Yelping as their job or duty. As Andrejevic (2007) notes, marketers often refer to the offloading of labor onto consumers “as a ‘duty’ of interaction” in participatory web cultures (p. 144). As a job or duty, Yelping thereby becomes a task to be performed well; as they user *takes up the interest* of their “boss” (Yelp) and come to *identify* with the site’s goals of promoting “Real People, Real Reviews.”

One way that users exhibit identification with Yelp’s owners and commercial objectives in through their inclination to uphold the goals and objectives of Yelp as defined in the site’s Content Guidelines and Terms of Service. A “good reviewer,” for example, is someone who is “useful, funny and cool” (UFC) or will “inform and optionally entertain,” “tell a good story” that is also funny (“humor’s key!”). Conversely, users who produce content that is boring, too lengthy, too subjective or “too short” to be useful (the latter of which being the most common complaint) effectively “add no value to Yelp” and are “worthless in our community.” As a Yelp Elite member, Peter M expressed feeling a sense of responsibility to promote “good reviews” which he does by occasionally “friending” new users whose reviews meet his personal standards: “It’s important to encourage the *right* type of review, or what I perceive is the right type of review.” In encouraging the “right” kind of productivity through this type of sociality (“friending”), Yelpers like Peter M clearly take on the position of [unpaid] site monitors that urge participation in certain directions. These directions, however, are almost always in line with Yelp’s intended goals of producing valuable, *credible* content (e.g., “truth, trust, transparency”). Instead of hiring site monitors to regularly fact-check or review the site’s content, Yelp successfully offloads this work onto serious Yelpers who voluntarily “govern” the site through a number of self-policing (and promoting) mechanisms. Under the guise of prosumer freedom and empowerment it is therefore the under-compensated work of *Yelpers* that ensures Yelp’s

commitment to “Real People, Real Reviews.” In essence, while Yelpers are reflexively aware of the limitations that Yelp poses to the prosumption process, they also accept these limitations in part through their *identification* with the site’s commercial goals and imperatives.

Analysis: Empowering and Exploiting the *Customer Consumer*

Drawing claims that quantitatively or qualitatively assess where consumer-reviewing is located in the empowerment/exploitation debate fails to account for the complexities involved in how users contest, negotiate and approach these practices. The participants I interviewed clearly perceived their work and activity on the site as empowering on both individual and societal levels - if not to empower themselves, then to empower others through self-improvement, autonomy, efficiency, accountability, the capacity to effect change. Additionally, they also exhibited a reflexive awareness of the site’s propensity to harness the unpaid labor of their prosumption towards commercial ends. Many users adapted Yelp for their own purposes, and spoke reflexively about the site’s more problematic power dynamics. Furthermore, it is clear that Yelpers have elicited direct *responses* from business owners (ranging from death threats to gratitude) which indicate that at the very least, a Yelper’s “work” is not *always* futile. In some sense, even the *perceived* sense of accountability on the part of local businesses theoretically suggests that Yelp mediates empowerment via the consumer-centric “power shift” that prosumption supposedly affords.¹⁴⁹

However, despite these outcomes, participants also pointed out a number of the site’s limitations, particularly as it applied to the unpaid work offloaded onto users and the re-creation

¹⁴⁹ Business owners also frequently take their complaints directly to the Yelp Talk threads or, at times, to the local press in which individual reviewers are identified and lambasted. While this particular issue is outside the scope of this paper, local media outlets frequently side with business owners. Participants from both east coast and west coast cities identified blogs or regular online columns for local weekly papers that regularly lambast Yelp reviewers on behalf of business owners.

of an asymmetrical relationship between the site owners and users. While this research does not try to “measure” how much users *get* in exchange for what they *give*, interviews revealed that both material and immaterial forms of compensation are not so much an exchange for labor but in fact, serve to encourage *more labor* from users. Be it the Elite parties, unsanctioned “gifts” from businesses, or positive feedback from other users, all of these forms *encourage the production of more content for Yelp*. In this sense, unless a user never registers for an account or writes a review, the prosumer is *always* producing surplus labor/value for Yelp.

There is no doubt that Yelp commercially benefits from the unpaid labor of its users. Looking at presumption on Yelp through a Marxist lens suggests that Yelp’s material value is based on an *exploitative* set of power relations. In his analysis of capitalist work relations, Marx (1973) articulated exploitation by looking at the ways in which factory owners valorized the labor of workers by forcing them to work above and beyond the equal rate of exchange; laborers thus not only worked the necessary labor time to equal the value of the exchange, they also worked surplus labor-time so that capitalist owners could extract additional value (profit) from this relationship. By definition, therefore, Yelping is premised on exploitation through the extraction of *surplus labor* from users which in turn, creates [surplus] *value* for Yelp’s owners. This occurs when Yelpers expend additional productivity on the site beyond their “normal” review activity – for example, by writing Elite event reviews (events which are to serve as “payment/reward” for productivity in the first place), patronizing local sponsors (at the expense of the users’ own scarce resources), friending, flagging, monitoring or engaging in other forms of governance to preserve and valorize the goals of the site’s owners. Beyond that, Yelp also capitalizes on the labor of its users by selling review content to third parties such as websites that aggregate reviews or integrate them into their own content or service without compensation to

the user; the local press (electronic *and* print) also buys Yelp content for weekly columns which will often identify users by not only name, but by *photographs* taken directly off the site almost always without the user's knowledge.¹⁵⁰ In other words, being a "true" Yelper requires both material and immaterial expenditures above and beyond the rate of material compensation that in effect, re-produces an asymmetrical relationship of work/pay back in favor of the site's owners.

Commensurate with the findings in Chapter Four, Yelpers promote a form of "consumer empowerment" that appeals to the *consumer as customer*. By this logic, Yelp provides the means to monitor, help improve or hold accountable businesses that fail to meet consumer needs; it also provides consumers with the necessary resources to redress grievances, let businesses know when they are doing things right – in other words, empowering *customer consumers* with the ability to autonomously and efficiently navigate the realm of consumption while improving their creative, critical, writing and social skills. Prosumers thereby take on the duty of insuring that businesses, services and consumption experiences are not only better for themselves but for others, as well. As Rose (2001) argues, the imperative for consumers in a neoliberal society "is to become not only more efficient but more informed and even more critical" (quoted in Andrejevic, 2007, p. 149). In a society where individuals are expected to always be involved in a constant state of self-improvement – a state in which we are in "perpetual assessment" of the self – Yelp assists in the process of self-governance. Thus, the very themes that constitute how Yelpers *define* the notion of empowered consumption mimic the articulations of the neo-liberal consumer as one who is focused on self-improvement, creativity, autonomy and efficiency. Turning this analysis towards theories of governance in which the "empowered consumer" is positioned as a central component of neoliberal society, we can begin to see how Yelpers accept

¹⁵⁰ At least one Yelper expressed some discomfort with the fact that his reviews are often taken out of context and quoted in a weekly column without his knowledge. Weekly papers run "Hot on Yelp" columns or something like it which direct-quote (but often out of context) reviews on Yelp about local businesses (mostly restaurants).

the duty of free labor as a form of empowerment. As *customer consumers*, active Yelpers willingly identify with the perspective of Yelp's owners and engage in the site as a necessary means towards self-empowerment in a culture that is much more "fun," entertaining, social and easier than other modes of governing.¹⁵¹

The problem with "fun" and this limited form of self-empowerment is that it works to systematically obfuscate larger issues of political economic power, particularly those tied to consumption (e.g., the various issues for which political consumerism would account). In this next section I will evaluate the ways that Yelpers construct their reviewing activity as a form of consumer-citizenship and discuss the degree to which participants harness their productive power towards more political ends. How do these participants perceive Yelp as a form of consumer-citizenship beyond a space for the production of "empowered *customer consumers*?" Within this framework of prosumption's possibilities I also look at the ways in which Yelp has affected users' relationships with their local communities, and demonstrate the ways that Yelp mediates a productive relationship between prosumption, consumer-citizenship and localism.

Findings (Part 2)

The Politics of Consumption

A central critique of the neoliberal "empowered consumer" is that it is a highly individualistic subjectivity that assumes self-entrepreneurial and "responsible" consumption is a central part of "good citizenship." The good citizen is thus one who maximizes the self by eliminating risks and waste through financial management and independence (from the state or other forms of governing); empowered consumption thus provides the means for maximizing the

¹⁵¹ To this point, several reviewers separate Yelp from other local e-government or public service sites that are more administrative in content, reporting and discussing local crime, development, parking or other neighborhood issues, distinguishing these sites as "incredibly boring" public services in contrast to Yelp which is "fun" and at times, more community-minded than the former.

self *not* through society or collective action but through individual choices made privately, in the spheres of lifestyle and consumption (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). As issues of “risk” become an individual problem bound to the ethic of personal responsibility, consumer sites like Yelp become a “technology” for governing that assists in this process of self-empowerment. Moreover, the society in which the neoliberal consuming citizen (always acting as a *customer consumer*) exists is one that has become increasingly individualized, wholly focused on self-improvement and minimizing personal risk (such as bad purchasing decisions) (Bauman, 2001). As it relates to the politics of consumption, therefore, this individualization is expressed in how consumers “vote” with their dollar; yet the overall impact of this vote is relatively ineffective in redressing the type of local or global inequalities that collaborative organizational movements are focused on (e.g., consumer activist movements). As Hilton notes (2003), “Consumerism, then, has offered the most potential *not* when it has confined itself to obtaining value for money at the point of sale, *but when it has sought an active relationship with the wider concerns of citizenship*” (p. 339, emphasis added). So long as the desire or motivation of the empowered consumer is to better the self (e.g., save money, have more efficient experiences, waste less, hone one’s writing skills), collectively agitating for the redress of market-based inequalities via consumer activism will remain wholly ineffective.¹⁵²

While most interview participants saw the practice of consumer-reviewing as a “fun” but informative enterprise, Yelpers also problematized the clear demarcation between neoliberal modes of consumer-citizenship and more “agitative,” politically-inspired forms of consumer activism – at least in rhetoric. None of the participants necessarily embodied only one particular consumer “type,” goal, or motivation. Just as participants contested, negotiated and rationalized

¹⁵² Notwithstanding the obvious ideological contradiction that collective action poses to the highly individualized nature of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility promoted by the neoliberal empowered consumer.

the line between Yelp's empowering and exploitative tendencies, so did the occasional user speak of "pushing back" against the site's generally hedonic and consumption-oriented culture to appropriate Yelp as a space to agitate or engage others in the politics of consumption. However, if the reviews and interviews conducted and analyzed for this study are at all generalizable to the rest of the Yelp community, it also true that those who advocated for Yelp as a site of consumer-citizenship were comparatively anomalous to the general culture of the site (as also revealed in Chapter Four).

Several individuals I interviewed offered counter-perspectives to the dominant use of Yelp – in other words, those who believed their reviews could impact change beyond the perceived goal of empowering consumers as customers to make more efficient and informed consumption decisions. Generally, interviews revealed three competing perspectives of Yelp as a space for consumer-citizenship: 1) those who felt Yelp was "not the place" for consumer politics; 2) those who had never thought about Yelp as a space for consumer politics but were open to its potential to serve as such; and 3) those who consciously used Yelp as a space to address the politics of consumption. In a second but related point, interviews also underscored the difference between consumer politics and consumers *of* politics. On Yelp, there is no shortage of the latter; in fact, there exist daily political discussions on Talk threads (e.g., the "News and Politics" category) despite the general absence of consumer politics in the review space. However, even where political discussions exist on Yelp Talk, such conversations are not necessarily about the politics of *consumption* (or even predominantly about such issues) but politics in the most general sense (e.g., international, national and local news stories).¹⁵³ Furthermore, discourses

¹⁵³ Notably, many Yelp visitors do not participate or read Yelp Talk threads. While consumer politics might at times be hashed out there amongst registered Yelpers, these conversations are different from creating counter-discourses in the review space. Further, participants generally found these spaces to be less democratic in that discourse is structured predominately by Yelp's internal social hierarchy, noting the tendency of the local "clique" or "Yelp

about *local* politics of consumption are far more disparate on the site. Thus, while counter-discourses about [local] consumption may occur in the Talk threads, the general consensus amongst committed Yelpers is that such commentary “does not belong” in the reviews themselves as they do not describe a “first-hand” or “normal customer experience” as required by site Guidelines. Meaning, Yelpers largely identified with the site’s normative definition of consumption and in effect, reproduced discourses that systematically fetishize the consumption of goods and services. As a result, Yelp is reproduced as a space for *customer consumers*, not *citizen consumers* or *consumer activists*, which threatens to delegitimize counter-discourses of consumption as “abnormal” and *irrelevant*.

“Yelp’s Not the Place for That”: The *Customer Consumer* on Yelp

Yelp promotes a culture of fun that celebrates consumer-centric consumption. As demonstrated in previous chapters, Yelpers tend to overwhelmingly favor discourses about hedonic goods and services (e.g., restaurants, coffee shops, spas) over more utilitarian or public services (e.g., doctors, libraries, post offices). Interview participants overwhelmingly situated their Yelping within the site’s culture of fun. When asked about their approach to reviewing local businesses and services, all 18 participants defaulted immediately to talking about restaurants in their responses, despite the fact I intentionally framed questions in neutral terms (e.g., “Tell me about your *reviewing* process” or “What do you want your *reviews* to accomplish?”). In mostly all cases, getting the conversation beyond restaurants required asking *specifically* about non-restaurant businesses and services, especially government and public services. Follow-up questions inquired about the difference between writing about restaurants and other services.

celebrities” to dominate and dictate conversation and consensus. While a thorough exploration of these social dynamics are outside the scope of this paper, future research might illuminate how these internal power structures also contribute to the site’s generally celebratory and hedonic approach to consumption.

Nearly all inquiries about reviewing public or government services required specific examples or discussion prompts.¹⁵⁴ Many participants did not see the value in reviewing anything outside restaurants; non-restaurant reviews would have to be motivated by an “extreme emotion” or experience to warrant a review, which Kelly J (the post-doctorate in nutrition studies) reasoned as the “polarizing tendencies of survey” studies. Most participants conferred that they would not feel inclined to review another type of business or service (e.g., public/government) unless they had an “extra-ordinary,” “egregious or wonderful,” “fantastic or horrible” experience.

The association of Yelp with restaurant reviews also meant that other services rarely even came to mind, as evidenced by statements such as: “I guess I never thought about reviewing that;” “A lot of things are uneventful;” “What am I supposed to say?” When I asked one of the most prolific reviewers in my sample about extending her 2,247 reviews to government or public services, she argued there were “way better websites for that.” After naming two local e-government websites she warily stated, “Oh, God; if this becomes a political thing? I’m not going to be into it at all; it won’t be fun!” Peter M also reinforced this position, as well, demonstrating the centrality of restaurants in his comment:

As far as political things, unless somebody’s like, some true hate monger or something like that, it’s probably not going to impact me. I don’t care if you’re Democrat or Republican, gay or straight or whatever, how’s the food? That’s what I’m there for.

While local restaurants do not exist outside the politics of consumption, participants generally did not make this connection to any great extent.¹⁵⁵ When asked about the potential for Yelp to serve as a space where users could have an impact on political processes or engage in

¹⁵⁴ Undoubtedly, for the individuals I interviewed (and likely Yelpers in general) Yelp is overwhelmingly understood and approached by users as a website for finding and reviewing *restaurants* over other businesses and services.

¹⁵⁵ In fact, the inability to see the politics involved in consumption at local restaurants may partially explain why participants generally did not see the value in using the reviews space to offer counter-discourses about production and consumption practices, suggesting the power of commodity fetishism even in the context of presumption’s capabilities of increasing transparency.

political consumerism, most participants reinforced the same reasons given above – they had either “never thought about” using Yelp in this way or, conversely, that Yelp reviews were “not the place” for these kinds of discussions. This latter point is important, however, because it reinforces Yelp’s official “General Guidelines” which state that Yelp reviews are not the appropriate forum for discussing the politics of consumption. Rather, in accordance with Yelp’s Review Guidelines, most participants who felt this way again suggested that consumer politics be relegated to “another forum” (e.g., Talk threads).¹⁵⁶ It is worth noting, however, that some of these participants who advocated for setting such discursive restraints on political talk did not know they were in fact reinforcing site policies.

Interestingly, some of those who felt Yelp was “not the place” for the politics of consumption were quite conscious of activist issues related to political consumerism (e.g., food politics, labor and environmental issues).¹⁵⁷ For example, in a conversation with Oliver J about the “abhorrent” food sourcing and labor practices of a national seafood chain, I asked what prevented him from writing a negative review on the basis of these practices:

Oliver J: *I just don't think that Yelp is really, like, the kind of place for that...I'm not going [to that restaurant] and I'm not going to say that you won't enjoy it because I don't [eat there] ... I just think that'd be better suited for a different place, even though I*

¹⁵⁶ Interestingly, however, Yelp’s official Guidelines do not specifically recommend the Talk threads as the “appropriate forum,” either. Note how the ambiguity of the rule can be read to suggest that Yelp is altogether generally not the appropriate forum for such discussions *at all*: “Find the right forum: Please make sure your contributions are relevant and appropriate to the forum. For example, reviews aren’t the place for random rants about a business’s employment practices, political ideologies, or other matters that don’t address the core of the consumer experience. Some things are better addressed in other forums.”

¹⁵⁷ These participants also expressed some frustration with the fact that more often than not, Yelp filters or removes politicized reviews as violating the site’s Content Guidelines – thus frustrating the efforts to review in such fashion and eliminating the number of political reviews present on the site. Yelp also systematically eliminates reviews that users leave for the corporate headquarters of large companies which the site justifies as violating its “first-hand experience” policy. Where these measures do not altogether eliminate political or social commentary, they certainly frustrate users from taking the time to write reviews that will “get removed instantly if you talk about global practices of Bank of America or something.” Furthermore, the ambiguity of Yelp’s policies systematically frustrates attempts at lodging political economic critiques in general while also calling into question what actually defines a “first-hand experience.” As Scott S noted, Yelp will remove corporate critiques “because it’s not your direct experience even though it’s bullshit because it’s like, if I’ve been in Bank of America or if I had been a customer for twenty years then I have had direct experience with that company.”

don't know, maybe you're right, maybe that's something worth thinking about. Like I just never, again, never thought to... [trails off]

Me: *What do you think would be a better place for that kind of conversation?*

Oliver J: *Um, ideally it would almost be like a media outlet. Like a news thing, um. I know that like, actual reports get released on this stuff and I think that that's kind of like, a better place where you can actually get sources and credibility but um, you know, is it necessarily the most widely read place to find the information? Probably not, so...*

Me: *You mean Yelp's not the most widely read?*

Oliver J: *No, I mean like the news, news sources and like press releases and things like that, like...so, um, I mean I guess that's kind of an interesting thought... [pauses] That's a good question. Because I was about to say that the best way to kind of get it out is at a local level and I guess Yelp kind of is, like, one of the better ways; it reaches a certain subset but yeah like, on a local level it kind of speaks out but it's not [pauses] - I don't know, I just think the audience of Yelp is like kinda different. I also get kind of annoyed when I read reviews of things that aren't necessarily related to the place. Like, I would think if I were to read a review about something [like that], I just don't feel that it's related to what's being reviewed.*

On the one hand, Oliver J reinforced Yelp's own position that the reviews are "not the place" for consumer politics; while he does at some point thoughtfully reconsider using the site in this way, he ultimately identified with Yelp's policies and, in effect, reified the "normal customer experience." On the other hand, despite the realization that politics are bound to production and consumption practices (e.g., sourcing and exploitative work conditions), Oliver J more importantly failed to see how these issues were necessarily *relevant* or "related to" the consumption of seafood at a local franchise. He goes from discussing the "abhorrent" fishing practices of a corporate chain in detail, to concluding that there is no connection between these practices and the way a restaurant should be evaluated. Not only does this irrelevance demonstrate the *power* of commodity fetishism, it also demonstrates the role Yelp plays in mystifying and reproducing the exploitative relations of power embedded in commodity

production.¹⁵⁸ Additionally, this position also suggests that there is division between recognizing the politics of consumption and how consumers might take action to do something about them. If consumer reviews are not the place for discussing such issues, then where *is* the “right” place?

As discussed previously, Yelpers often identify with the goals of the site’s owners by regularly monitoring reviews and Talk threads to insure that the site’s “integrity” is upheld. This form of identification also surfaced as justification for why users discouraged discourses of political consumerism in Yelp reviews. In one of the most compelling examples I heard, an east coast Yelper, Josh S, related an instance in which he and other local site members aggressively monitored, urged for, and defended the removal of negative reviews that had accused a local country club of racist business practices. In this particular case, a local country club made national news after it allegedly forced a large group of children from an inner-city summer camp - all of whom were African-American - to leave the club’s swimming pool after attendant club members complained about the children being there. Allegations of racism stemmed from racially insensitive comments that the children reportedly overheard from the all-white club members, as well as comments made by the pool manager’s official public statement. Shortly after the story broke national news, Yelp reviewers from around the country began to leave negative ratings and reviews on the country club’s business listing; most openly criticized the club as racist or failing to follow through its contract with the summer camp. A few former club members also spoke out in reviews and Talk threads dedicated to the issue, expressing similar experiences with racism, thereby fueling assertions this was not merely a “misunderstanding” or baseless media spectacle. Because most of the reviewers did not exhibit a “first-hand experience” at the club, or were basing their reviews on the business’s presumed ideologies, local Yelpers began flagging each review under on the basis that they violated Yelp’s Review Guidelines. By

¹⁵⁸ Or, more accurately, how exploitative relations of power exist along all steps of the global value chain.

the end of the week, only two reviews were left for display under the club's Yelp listing; sixty-one reviews had been completely removed and 13 were filtered.¹⁵⁹ Yelpers from around the country then moved their critique onto the local city's Talk threads, asking if local members had flagged the reviews for removal because they sided with the country club's racist practices. According to Josh S, he and other members of the local Yelp community flagged the reviews simply because: "Yelp is not *for* that."

Clearly you have to have a first-hand experience and clearly since you live in California you're not swimming in that pool - you heard about it on the news. You don't really know the story... We were also like, 'we agree with you but you're breaking the process and we can flag you' and they kept telling us - 'well you're supporting them, or you're screwing up the profits' it just got into weird arguments...¹⁶⁰ We - the community - did protect the Yelp process...and we got a lot of heat from the other Yelpers 'cause they wanted to do this but I don't know, I guess in [our city] we worry we could be hurting someone if we don't play by the hard and fast rules.

The community's reasoning, of course, assumes Yelp's review guidelines are the "right" rules, or rules that best protect the abuse of the system. When I asked if he felt that Yelp's review served this latter function, Josh S responded: "Yeah, to protect the integrity of it, you know? I think maybe 'rules' sounds like maybe 'we're all following these *rules*.' But what we're worried about is that if we're going to participate, we'd like the integrity to be as [good] as possible." As it went, members deliberated at length with many out-of-state Yelpers about the issue, maintaining

¹⁵⁹ Reviews that are permanently removed from the site are not visible but listed behind a security wall with the comment, "This review has been removed for violating our Content Guidelines or Terms of Services." Filtered reviews are still visible, but are hidden behind a security wall, as well. They can be accessed by entering a CAPTCHA security phrase.

¹⁶⁰ In the actual Talk thread discussion, however, a majority of the Yelpers who promoted the removal of these reviews expressed a high level of skepticism about the actual motivations of the pool manager and country club staff, as well as the details of the event itself. There were many instances of implicit racism amongst the reviewers themselves, with several members complaining that the story itself "was not a big deal." The most common critiques were lodged against the unreliability and factual inaccuracies of a "sensational" news media system. While members justified flagging the reviews for their violation of Yelp's guidelines, few expressed sympathy with anyone other than the country club's pool manager at the center of the debate. Instead, many members downplayed the issue of racism by blaming the media in general for being overtly sensational and an institution notorious for factual inaccuracy. The displacement of blame throughout the thread onto the media raises a number of questions about the degree to which review removals were *necessarily* based on a violation of Yelp's Content Guidelines or motivated by implicitly racist or post-racial assumptions.

their position to flag reviews that violated Yelp’s Official Review Guidelines. One local member summarized this consensus through a reiteration of Yelp’s slogan, stating in a post to the Talk threads: “Real reviews by real people...not social commentary based on a newspaper article.” As the argument between local and national Yelpers eventually exhausted, one of the local community’s dominant members spoke on behalf of the city’s Yelp community to reinforce “what they’re all about,” stating: “If you’re ever [in the area] we’d all be more than glad to take you out and share some drinks, some good food and some laughs. That’s what we’re about. Not the politics.”¹⁶¹ Through this example we see how a political moment is systematically *depoliticized* by the local Yelp community’s identification with the company’s overall intended goals and functions; acting as a governing body, local community members took up the job of the site’s paid employees by monitoring and flagging reviews that violated company guidelines. Through this identification process, Yelpers ultimately delegitimized consumer reviewing (and thus consumption itself) as a political practice.

“If Yelp’s Not a Form of Social Activism, Than Maybe it Should be:” The *Citizen*

Consumer/Consumer Activist on Yelp

Not all participants failed to see the value of using Yelp as a space for expressing themselves as *citizen consumers* or *consumer activists*. Several participants acknowledged having used the review space for social commentary, while other interviewees discussed using Yelp Talk to engage in political discussions despite the likelihood of inspiring mean-spirited

¹⁶¹ While a critical discourse analysis of the thread is outside the scope of this project, it only takes a cursory reading to see how the local community’s position to censor the reviews was largely determined and driven by a few dominant “Yelp celebrity” voices (i.e., opinion leaders). Identifying these individuals as “dominant” members is not limited to personal conjecture; rather, Josh S identified these members as central to what he called “the clique” made up of key local Yelp members (including himself). Members of “the clique” are also the most prolific on Yelp Talk.

discourse.¹⁶² For these reviewers, Yelp is not so much a social networking site as it is a “public” or “community service” through which it is possible to “do some good.” One participant discussed Yelping as “a key component to being a good citizen.”¹⁶³

Of the few reviewers who claimed to frequently insert social commentary into the review space, Mark S in particular claimed to approach consumer-reviewing with the explicit goal of creating counter-discourses aimed at agitating for social and political-economic change, stating: “I mean if it’s not a form of social activism to everybody, maybe it should be.” With the expressed hope of “making people think,” Mark S intentionally reviews non-profit organizations, corporate headquarters and other public and government services (e.g., transportation, post offices, utilities) in addition to the common reviews of restaurants and suppliers of other “hedonic” goods and services. For Mark S, Yelp consumer-reviewing provided a way to express himself as a citizen and offer “a sensibility that isn’t represented on Yelp.”

A lot of people just don’t have a social conscience; they’re not necessarily bad people they just kind of, you know, they stick their heads in the sand, you know? And I can’t afford to do that because these issues affect me, they affect people I care about and yeah, I stick social commentary in there; it’s, something I feel needs to be said. I mean you don’t have to be blue collar to be affected by labor issues; labor issues concern white collar workers, healthcare workers, you know, teachers? You know, it’s everything; yeah I do throw social commentary in there, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it. I mean I could just write, ‘Yeah, [this restaurant] rules, man’ but again, anybody could do that? It wouldn’t be interesting; I wouldn’t have as much fun doing it. I wouldn’t feel like I was doing some good.

¹⁶² A few participants expressed that they found Yelp “frustrating” for the very reasons referenced above. While Yelp is at times used by members to engage others in charitable fundraising activities¹⁶² or political debates, Scott S believed that Talk threads were an “ineffective” space to discuss issues pertaining to political consumerism: “If you ever try to talk about economics, if you ever try to talk about exploitation or anything like, that I’m interested in social justice-wise? It’s a complete waste to ever even mention that stuff.” Despite Yelp’s relatively educated user base, Scott S argued that political conversations on Yelp Talk were rarely taken seriously and more often than not, quickly devolved into “inside jokes,” snarky comments and “people making fun of each other.” While fruitful discussions about political issues of local or national interest occasionally sustained such abuses, many other participants seemed to also agree that the most effective and frequent conversations were typically about topics *other than* the politics of consumption.

¹⁶³ Equating Yelping as “good citizenship” also situates Yelp as a technology for neoliberal governance and thus suggests that consumer activism is not wholly separate from empowered consumption.

As a reviewer, Mark S's viewpoint was certainly in the minority as it relates to the depths with which some of the more politically-minded Yelpers I interviewed approached their reviewing.

The most predominant way users expressed themselves as *citizen consumers* occurred through the discursive promotion of “the local.” Ironically, while nearly every Yelper acknowledged that Yelp functioned to promote a “buy local” tenet, only Mark S acknowledged this movement as a political or civic project (he referred to it as providing a “community service” which I discuss at length in the next section). Triangulating the conclusions drawn in the analysis of consumer reviews in Chapter Four, interview participants described promoting local consumption in similar ways. Some articulated “local” as a proximate business (close to where they lived); others understood local to be a “small” business, while most seemed to articulate local businesses as “independent from” corporate chains. Nearly everyone I interviewed expressed a preference for local businesses over corporate chains, often on explicitly political grounds – e.g., local businesses keep more money in the community, are environmentally friendly or more responsive to the community's needs.¹⁶⁴ Only two participants poignantly asked “What's *local*?” when asked to explain their preference with the intention of raising the point that small, independent and proximate businesses are still bound up in global commodity chains not unlike their corporate counter-parts – particularly in regards to food sourcing. For example, several respondents questioned the notion of “the local,” pointing out they “didn't know” if their favorite local restaurant sourced food locally or not. Generally though, participants treated local businesses with a degree of reverence and thus approached them differently on Yelp; for example, some stated that they would not “abuse” the review space of a local business in the way

¹⁶⁴ Participants also supported local consumption for other reasons as well, such as preserving local culture, preventing homogenization associated with corporate chains, and the assumption that local is “healthier.” Some participants, however, only expressed local as an issue of *preference* when all things were equal; no one “preferred” chains, but several acknowledged that value, price and convenience is often a more important determining factor when it comes to spending money.

they sometimes “let loose” on corporate chains. Ken D saw chains as “fair-game” since they have less to lose and are “thicker-skinned,” noting the damaging consequences that irreverent content could have on the livelihood of local businesses owners. Similarly, Scott S claimed he consciously wrote reviews for local private businesses with more detail than “non-local” (proximate or corporate) listings, and would not disrespect the review space with his “creative story” writing exercises that he often leaves for listings in other categories.¹⁶⁵

The participants I interviewed saw their Yelp activity, therefore, as a conscious attempt to *preserve the local*; significantly, this extends the conceptualization of “local” outside of business to a broader *local culture*.¹⁶⁶ This is perhaps best exemplified by the general irreverence participants had for corporate chains and other non-local business listings compared to locally-owned and operated establishments. Concerns about the damaging consequences of reviews on small businesses were inextricably tied to a concern about their potentially negative impact on *local culture*, as well. For example, most participants felt strongly about preventing corporate chains from “taking over” their communities, exemplified by comments like: “I’m a big fan of little mom and pops so if I can get something on [Yelp] so that they can stay in business so that chains like Starbucks don’t take everybody out, I think that’s a good thing,” and “I think it’s important to support local businesses because it keeps the flavor of the city because otherwise it’s too homogenous - especially in neighborhoods with high rent to prevent chains from taking over.” Another reviewer discussed her use of Yelp to highlight local businesses as the primary “go-to” establishment rather than framing them as the “*alternative to*” the popular chain default.

Yelp’s social function also mediates the site’s cultural commitment to the local; a number of participants expressed that there was a heavy degree of “peer pressure” to support local

¹⁶⁵ As an aspiring writer, Scott S often fills review spaces with lengthy creative writing essays that “tell a story” about something from his past and then loosely connects the tale with the place being “reviewed” in the end.

¹⁶⁶ Implicit to this point, of course, is that business plays a significant role in shaping culture.

businesses on Yelp. Those who supported too many non-local (chain) businesses with frequent reviews were subjected to criticism from other community members. Participants also described feeling “looked down upon” for reviewing too many chains or for not promoting local culture.¹⁶⁷ As a result, such practices were openly mocked, viewed with skepticism or treated as a form of “cheating” (e.g., “padding” your review count)¹⁶⁸ by members from the Yelp community.¹⁶⁹

Peer pressure to support the goals of cultural preservation and local consumption can be understood, I would argue, as *consumers acting as citizens*. For instance, even members who did not see the value of Yelp as a political platform recognized the support it offered local businesses in the uphill battles they faced in the context of a dual economic structure (Bowles & Edwards, 1993), while others saw the site as a way of demonstrating citizenship by expressing pride in local institutions. Invoking Juba's (2007) criteria for consumer-citizenship, it is possible to argue that Yelp in some ways serves as a means by which participants can exercise their “duties” (*responsibility*) to preserve local culture (*residence*) by creating discourses with a positive bias towards local businesses. This latter point explains the negative opinion most participants had towards chains but yet did not see the purpose or value in actually reviewing them (i.e., users generally preferred to create a positive discourse around small businesses than negative anti-corporate criticism).¹⁷⁰ Additionally, as an expression of consumer-citizenship participants used Yelp as a means of preventing the “McDonaldization” of their local cultural landscape (Ritzer,

¹⁶⁷ This often manifested in being criticized for not being a “foodie.” Central to being a “foodie,” of course, is not eating in restaurant chains.

¹⁶⁸ One participant had written a negative review of AT&T's headquarters but removed it himself in fear that other Yelpers might think he was trying to “artificially inflate his review count.”

¹⁶⁹ However, as many participants also mentioned, the number of chain reviews a Yelper can get away with depends on their social status within that local Yelp community – particularly amongst the opinion leaders who drive the Talk threads. Some of the more prolific but popular reviewers such as Ellen K unexplainably “got away with” inflating her review count with chain reviews while other less popular members were verbally harassed for the same tactics. Several interviews from the east coast urban sample triangulated this point by independently referencing the same local reviewer who is frequently insulted for her high number of corporate chain reviews. Despite my attempts, I was unable to establish contact with this reviewer.

¹⁷⁰ This preference echoes what Micheletti (2003) refers to as “buycotts” or “positive political consumerism.”

1993) which is something that the” Yelp community generally seems to support. In this sense, local citizenship becomes an identity of value on Yelp that is in part determined by one’s commitment to local consumption practices; meaning, the *types* of places one reviews in the virtual influences and overlaps with consumer behavior in the real.¹⁷¹ Local identity or preserving local identity through virtual mechanisms like Yelp thus demonstrate the growing necessity to stop seeing the “virtual” space as distinct from physical, lived spaces (Mitra & Schwartz, 2001).

That being said, the peer pressure assigned to “going local” also at times seemed less about the politics of consumption than a type of social or cultural class distinction. Thus, beyond *citizen consumers* promoting local consumption, it is possible that promoting the “local” is a form of status-seeking in which upwardly mobile cultural elites (e.g., “foodies”) present their commitment to the local as a form of class distinction (Bourdieu, 1986). As a status signifier, localism is rearticulated in aesthetic terms as discussed in Chapter Four. This prioritization of localism as bound to one’s socio-cultural status rather than a local political or civic identity may in part explain why almost no one I interviewed identified local consumption as a form of political consumerism, as defined by Micheletti (2003), or reviewing strictly “local” businesses and services as a distinctly political expression. In discussing local consumption, Mary Beth R confessed she did not feel compelled to shop locally because “I feel like because it’s become such a *movement* it makes me not like it. So I turn away from it.” For her, the politics of residence and buying local are undermined by its “trendy” consumable aesthetic appeal.

To conclude, participants expressed genuine desire to preserve local culture through the support of local businesses and there certainly exists peer pressure on Yelp to do so. In fact,

¹⁷¹ Notably, local consumer-citizenship to some degree supports Yelp’s central objective of generating truth, trust and transparency (given the assumption that locals offer “more reliable” critiques than visitors or non-locals).

Yelp's design facilitates this peer pressure. The review space essentially functions as a means of virtual surveillance whereby other locals can check on (and potentially re-regulate) the offline behavior of other community members (e.g., such as where, and at what types of places, they have been spending their money).¹⁷² However, local consumption is not necessarily *always* bound to the processes or practices of democratic citizenship; for some, shopping "locally" serves as an identity signifier based on cultural and class distinctions (e.g., "foodies" do not eat at Applebee's). Yelp thus exists as a site of conflict between those who use the space for expressed political purposes, a function of social identity and class distinction, or a resource for empowered consumption. This conflict is at least partially reconciled by proponents of the latter who willingly identify, and self-govern in accordance, with Yelp policies and Content Guidelines.¹⁷³

[Re]Mediating the Local

One of the final research questions for this dissertation project aims to understand how Yelp bridges online practices with offline lived realities in a distinctly local context. Specifically, how does Yelp function at the local level? Interviews revealed that Yelp not only mediates a relationship to the local, but uses the context of localism to mediate relationships, as well. Specifically, Yelp "mediates" through localism in two ways: by connecting users to *each other*, and by connecting users (as consuming citizens) to their local *place*.

¹⁷² Many participants claimed they would not review a corporate chain while others implied they knew *better than* to review too many in fear of retribution from other community members.

¹⁷³ It also seems worth asking whether or not Yelp actually *favor* chains to some degree by eliminating them from the conversation. As a few members pointed out, corporate chains (including local franchises) can have little effect over their quality of product; for this reason, amongst others, reviewing corporate headquarters is understood as a wasted endeavor on Yelp. Therefore, does being so critical of local businesses effectively put them at a *disadvantage* by altogether leaving chains out of the conversation? Even if Yelp benefits local businesses, the site creates yet another layer of discourse about consumption that obfuscates any number of social, political and economic issues along the global commodity chain – thereby reproducing existing social relations, production processes and other exploitative practices.

Connecting locals. In its most obvious form, the Yelp Elite Squad provides a structural ‘bridge’ between online and offline sociality, introducing and organizing people who share the same geographic space. Yelp essentially works to create communities not only through the site’s distinct social codes and goals, but via communities-within-communities that frequently assemble on their own offline – at times abandoning Yelp altogether.¹⁷⁴ In my conversations with Yelpers, however, only members of the Yelp Elite had ever transcended the online space to meet other local Yelpers in a face-to-face offline context. Without Elite parties it seems, local community members might very well stay online without ever meeting, despite living within relative close proximity or even simultaneously “checking in” to the same places.¹⁷⁵

Thus, Yelp also mediates sociality through the *re-mediation of the local* by providing the space and incentive for people to get together offline. This echoes Hardey’s (2007) description of the impact that new technologies are having on localization: “This ‘re-mediation’ may witness a greater clustering of people with others that share similar characteristics, networks and preferences” (p. 880). Yelp’s [re]mediation of sociality around the local is a good example of how discourse and behavior merge in the cybernetic space (Mitra & Schwartz, 2001). Using location to mediate sociality (both physical and virtual), Yelp contributes to a fluid social space in which online and offline discourses, practices and actions continually ebb and flow, influence and re-shape new practices and actions. Yelp creates what Hardey has called a “synergistic relationship” between users, consumer reviews (prosumption) and location that facilitates

¹⁷⁴ Several interview participants talked about the proliferation of “Unofficial Yelp Events” whereby locals regularly assemble for meet-ups unsanctioned by Yelp; some of these friend-groups formed through Yelp have since collectively left the site altogether, and continue to socialize on their own.

¹⁷⁵ In regard to the latter point, two participants acknowledged “checking in” to a local business at the same time as another local Yelper from their “friend” list who they had never met. In neither instance did they establish contact with that “friend,” despite their interactions over Yelp (online). To the former point, those participants who do not reside in cities or towns with a Yelp Elite Squad (and thus do not have a Community Manager to arrange Elite events) had also never met other local Yelpers offline. Thus, online sociality tends to remain online despite proximity in the absence of structured interactions provided through Yelp Elite events.

“interactions between places and people who share the city as the common context for social life” (p. 879). For example, Peter M noted how reviews often “become a point of conversation” that later inspire the organization of offline gatherings; he and other local Yelp Elites might privately “hash out” their disagreements about a particular restaurant over a shared meal there, or meet up to collectively “mass review” a new local business. Those interactions are then brought *back* into the online space through Yelp’s various points of sociality which then in turn, inspire new conversations and/or actions. As Hardey similarly noted in his analysis of local blogs, there is “reciprocity” between the depictions of city life made public online, and the relationships they inspire or change as a result of those depictions. The point here is that the online activity of reviewing creates an incentive for social engagement; Yelp provides the incentive for strangers to interact *locally*; as consuming citizens, these strangers form relationships and assemble both *online* and *offline* to create communities and interactions where they did not previously exist. On the physical/offline side of the cybernetic space, it is also significant that these communities are not congregating at nearby corporate chains but redirect commerce and sociality to locally-owned, independent establishments.

Connecting locals to place. As Hardey (2007) notes, in the cybernetic space “the city is both re-visualized and experienced as people make connections with *each other* and *places* that may be new to them” (emphasis added, p. 875).¹⁷⁶ Yelp, therefore, does not just mediate relationships between *people* but between people and *places*, as well. As interviews revealed, Yelp inspires and assists with the navigation, acquaintance, exploration and discovery of old and new, familiar and unfamiliar environments. For example, Yelp has helped new residents assimilate to new neighborhoods just as often as it provides users with a way to “re-experience”

¹⁷⁶ Hardey does not use the term “cybernetic space” but elaborates on the collapse of offline/online or real/virtual in this same manner.

a long-time residence. A number of users discussed Yelp's capacity for helping them to "see" the city in new ways, developing a new appreciation for their physical communities, and prompting new engagements with local spaces. Josh S claimed that Yelp has prompted him to "look into smaller doorways more as I wander down the street" while several reviewers said Yelping helped them climb "out of a rut" defined by routine daily lives and practices. As one west coast user summarized, "I have gone to places I never would have found on my own, for sure. Going to events and meeting people has been cool; I have skipped over places with bad reviews. I try to stay as local as possible. I try new places more often." Additionally, Yelp's mobile applications also mediate the relationship to local place by redirecting movement through space and introducing people to new pockets of life in their cities. Yelp effectively creates a sense of familiarity "so that the city is never 'strange'" (Hardey, p. 878).

A number of interview participants specifically stated that Yelp offers them a means for expressing loyalty to specific regions or areas within the geographical confines of the city, most often occurring over the Talk threads. Yelp Talk commonly functions as a forum for giving and receiving advice and recommendations from locals. Questions from non-locals about tourism or relocating create the opportunity for locals to express loyalty and neighborhood affiliation, or to reinforce existing community ties. Quite a number of users admitted to frequently using Yelp as a way to positively portray or defend their cities from "haters" who make unsavory or derogatory comments about their hometown. Speaking to this latter point, Mark S admitted to finding negative reviews that bashed his city "hurtful." He spoke at length about the tendency of visitors or non-locals to conflate a bad business experience (e.g., a dirty motel) with the city's residents or overall local culture. As a lifelong resident of this eastern city, Mark S described Yelp as "a community service" which he uses to expand the reputation of his hometown. By promoting

places people might not know about, Mark S claims, “It’s not just for me; I’m doing it for the city.” When I asked Mark S how Yelping has impacted his relationship with his city, he stated:

I think it’s made me appreciate the city all the more. I think it’s made me appreciate the fact that we can hold our own against other major cities in terms of amenities and everything. In fact you can even say that some of my reviews are even love letters to the city.

For Mark S, the cybernetic space of Yelp has intensified his personal connection to physical place. However, he also uses Yelp as a platform for promoting and sharing this connection with other residents, as well. For this reason, his personal Yelp goal has been to cover the city “like nobody’s ever covered [it] before.” By focusing on and introducing neighborhood businesses outside the city center, Mark S has single-handedly expanded his hometown for other local Yelpers. His impact is affirmed by frequent messages and complements from people who have been motivated to explore the city’s smaller neighborhoods as a result of his reviews, at times even donating to the local non-profit organizations that he has written about.¹⁷⁷

In an interesting twist, however, several Yelpers described their promotion of the local as a self-serving mechanism; both Jean-Luc S and Kelly J recently relocated from metropolitan areas to a comparatively smaller city in the northeastern US, and felt defensive about the attitudes others expressed towards their new residence. Promoting locally-owned businesses in their new city thus served as a way of “proving” to others (and themselves) that their current place of residence has a noteworthy cultural scene; in other words, by writing the community’s local culture into being, these residents felt “justified” consuming it. Jean-Luc S underscored this point, stating, “It makes me feel good about it because I can kind of justify going to [local restaurants] and enjoying them, so it's totally self-serving.” Even Mark S justified much of his “community-minded” reviewing as a way of redressing his city’s bad reputation and in effect,

¹⁷⁷ Mark S’s influence over other Yelpers is evidenced not only by a number of personal anecdotes he described in our interview, but can be triangulated by comments and reviews left by users.

the way others perceived *him* as a resident of that city: “When people criticize [my city] they criticize the *people* more than anything. We’re all stupid, we’re all – they make us out to be a bunch of Neanderthals and it’s just not true.” Promoting the local is thus also a part of identity performance, self-presentation and management.

Analysis

As demonstrated, Yelp’s local orientation forges relationships not only between users but between users and their local communities. Moreover, some users appropriate the site as a means of presenting, sharing and intensifying loyalties and place-based identities. Thus, it is possible to say that the virtual space of Yelp *mediates localism*, or a relationship to local, place-based communities, while also using this relationship to the local as a way of *mediating sociality*.

Yelp’s unique orientation to “real” space (localism) and virtual interactions provide new ways of thinking about cybernetic spaces. For example, while Yelp embodies the dialectical interplay of the real and virtual (as well as discourse and behavior), it also challenges claims about the centrality of *location* to this hybrid world. Mitra and Schwartz (2001) argue, for example, that in the cybernetic space location no longer matters; instead, mobile and Internet technologies have made it so that location is irrelevant to experiencing an event or action. Rather, digital photographs, web cameras and other instantaneous devices make it so that we no longer have to be physically *present* to experience an event, conversation, or some other discursive moment. In the cybernetic space, they argue, traditional “elements of space such as location, nationality and movement become relatively less important” (p. 15). Local and national identities thus become “less critical since it is possible to remain physically tethered to one place but discursively connected to a different virtual community” (p. 15).

Yelp, however, makes location or “real space” increasingly relevant because one cannot “experience” a local restaurant or public service, museum or other cultural artifact without physically being there to consume it. Additionally, while *location* may be deemed an “old” or antiquated form of identification in the cybernetic space, local identity is central to the Yelp experience.¹⁷⁸ There is no shortage of defending one’s local community or its institutions on Yelp,¹⁷⁹ and it is physical *location* that sets the common social context that in turn, drives sociality and other discursive practices. So while it is true that one can still be “physically tethered to one place but discursively connected to a different virtual community” (e.g., living in New York City, writing about San Francisco), this is not a productive use of Yelp in terms of the site’s intended functions and goals. For instance, I can certainly review all of the places I have ever lived, but failing to produce content for the community in which I reside does not make me a very valuable Yelp community member. Tethered “here” but discursively “there” provides little basis for sociality in the world of Yelp. Thus, it is the very notion of presence and locality that ground Yelp as a cybernetic space; presence and locality are also what contribute Yelp’s perceived value as a space in which community members can [re]produce and consume discourses through and about local consumption.¹⁸⁰

As part of the cybernetic space, Yelp not only relies on the mediation of physical location to produce sociality but equally relies upon sociality in the [re]mediation of localism – thereby creating a feedback loop that is mutually dependent upon and constituted by the virtual and real

¹⁷⁸ See Bennett (2004) and Chapter Four for more discussion on this point.

¹⁷⁹ Of course it is also true that the *virtual* side of Yelp is structurally organized around location-space; meaning, Yelpers “belong” to one specific Yelp community bound by a place-based identification, despite the fact there are hundreds of options with which one might affiliate. However, most members who engage in this virtual space currently reside in that physical location symbolically represented by the virtual (although there are certainly exceptions for suburban and rural users).

¹⁸⁰ In some ways, a commitment to localism indirectly justifies prosumption for some users as a form of civic engagement, complicating the critique of prosumption as unpaid labor. As an example of this, one participant I interviewed equated Yelping with volunteerism.

simultaneously. However, unlike prior articulations of cybernetic space (e.g., Mitra & Schwartz, 2001), location still matters. Yelp provides a space for locals to reflect on their cities, and to produce new relationships or intensify existing ones through the creation of a *synergistic relationship* between people and place (Hardey, 2007). While Yelps “provides the sandbox,” as one user noted, physical location also sets the context for social action. As everyday interactions are now “increasingly represented and acted out through Web 2.0 resources” (p. 879), virtual information (e.g., consumer reviews) have the capacity to shape and transform patterns of everyday life and physical place.

So while the very concept of “local” is at times articulated differently by different people (e.g., a place-based orientation, symbol of independence, status indicator, lifestyle aesthetic) localism *does* appear as a central construct that mediates people’s relationships with geographically defined, place-based communities *and* each other. Producing relationships around the local thus *potentially* opens up new opportunities and discourses for civic and political engagement around the politics of [local] consumption. Peer pressure and friendly competition incite active engagement to preserve local culture and prevent homogenization, as well. Yet as demonstrated, however, these possibilities are limited for all intents and purposes to the *redirection of commerce*. Yelpers overwhelmingly harness the productive power of prosumption to discursively support local businesses; the site’s users have *not* been as successful in harnessing user power to agitate for other types of local political change (e.g., by creating accountability amongst local public and government services, or using the site as a form of consumer activism).

What are the implications of all this? To link the above points about location, cybernetic space and consumer reviews, Yelp’s redirection of commerce towards the local holds the potential to transform patterns of [urban] life and physical place. The site not only offers users

new ways of experiencing their respective cities, it also influences the way “people make nuanced choices about places to avoid, visit, live or work” (Hardey, 2007, p. 880). Virtual discourses thus influence and intersect with real, lived behaviors (Mitra & Schwartz, 2001; Hardey). Looking at prosumption in this way, the “under-compensated” labor of Yelp users theoretically opens up a number of new possibilities for reintroducing consumers as local *citizens*; however, as the analyses of reviews and interviews both suggest, consumer-citizenship more often than not means finding new places to spend money (e.g., eat and shop, but with *efficiency*, at that!). Representing the city, with few exceptions (e.g., Mark S and Darren W in Chapter Four) is overwhelmingly limited to a focus on hedonic consumption. Therefore, if Yelping effectively impacts the ways prosumers behave and experience the physical world, it is imperative that we reconsider the limitations and constraints prosumers themselves put on the creation of counter-discourses about consumption. That is, as Yelpers willingly and knowingly reify the “normal customer experience” through their identification with Yelp’s Review Guidelines, they effectively eliminate the possibilities for counter-discourses that might shape behavior in counter-hegemonic ways. As it stands, however, discourses that agitate or promote activist consumer politics are largely absent from the site and where they do appear, are deemed by the typical user as *irrelevant* to local consumption, as well.

Thus, even despite the fact that many Yelpers described themselves as generally “conscientious” consumers and identified with consumer politics to some degree, there was little consensus that connected consumer politics to the act of *Yelping*; where prosumers *did* use Yelp as a form of consumer activism (e.g., to promote and preserve the local), these actions were abstracted from politics as a mechanism of managing the self (e.g., to elevate the reputation of a city is to elevate one’s identity and/or enjoyment). In some respects, there is a disconnect

amongst Yelpers between recognizing the politics of production, consumption and the local as mutually constituted phenomena. At the same time, however, many Yelpers were acutely aware of the politics of production as it applied to their own labor on Yelp. It may be, therefore, that an expressed awareness of the politics of consumption only arises as a legitimate discourse when it is deemed *personally relevant*. This would explain why many of the people I interviewed were involved in civic associations, neighborhood associations, City Council, zoning meetings, kept tabs on local issues, participated on micro-local neighborhood websites, had a history of consumer activism, worked in social services, volunteered, fund raised and expressed an *active commitment* to consuming and socializing *locally*, yet overwhelmingly failed to see the connection between these commitments, consumption and their consumer-reviewing on Yelp. To conclude, I would argue that despite Yelp's basis in discourses through and about consumption, Yelpers undoubtedly reproduce a hegemonic discourse because of the failure to see the "self" in the production-consumption value chain, even in spite of a reflexive awareness of Yelp's own labor dynamics.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to understand the social practice of consumer-reviewing from the prosumer perspective, and in a way that also accounted for the site's distinctly "local" features. By reviewing the perceptions of empowerment and exploitation, interviews with participants revealed that the relegation of prosumers to either end of the spectrum does not accurately account for the complexities involved in the ways users contest and negotiate their place between these poles. Yelp theoretically affords "prosumer empowerment" by providing people with a resource for making better or preferred choices (e.g., restaurants that meet dietary needs; coffee shops that offer fair trade products) or to build and maintain social ties. Yelp also empowers

prosumers by giving them control over self-presentation and the ability to present a “desired self.” Even the ability to *participate* potentially enables a sense of empowerment in which consumers become part of the *production* of discourse that ostensibly shapes local business practices and relations. The possibility of material gains (e.g., lucrative social networks; job possibilities; being “discovered,” Elite parties) and immaterial recognition for work (e.g., accolades, complements, invitations from businesses) empower Yelpers into more productivity.

However, while Yelpers exhibited a reflexive awareness of their undercompensated laboring, regularly negotiating and contesting the exploitative and asymmetrical relations between them and the site’s owners, users also *rationalized* their own exploitation. Additionally, some Yelpers willingly identified with management in this exploitation by self-monitoring the site to reinforce the company’s terms of service. As Andrejevic (2007) notes, “Perhaps one the most fascinating aspects of this identification with producers and insiders facilitated by interactive media is the way in which it fosters acceptance of the rules of the game” (p. 160). In this case, abiding by the “rules of the game” on Yelp serves to reinforce a hegemonic discourse of *consumption* that effectively eliminates politics from the consumption process. Perhaps the abstraction of politics from consumption serves to reproduce the same belief about *prosumption*. Free labor is reflexively acknowledged, but never articulated through the lens of the political (or the political economy, for that matter). Ironically, identifying with site owners in the task of governing effectively *recreates* the very asymmetry between “owners” and “consumers” that the promise of prosumption supposedly eliminates. Ultimately, Yelp fails to deliver “on the promised transformative shift in power relations” and instead replaces one hierarchy of power for another (Andrejevic, p. 160).

Importantly, this research does not attempt to quantitatively or qualitatively “measure” just how [a]symmetrical the relationship between users and owners, nor does it mean to situate the enjoyment of prosumption as “a modern version of ‘false consciousness’” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010, p. 25). Rather, it is more interested in the way that users harness the possibilities of Yelp to systematically prevent virtual counter-discourses of consumption that might ultimately shape behavior in the “real.” Yelp, as revealed in Chapter Three, frames participation through a discourse of consumer power (or empowerment) that emphasizes hedonic pleasure and “fun” over more utilitarian, political or production-oriented possibilities. In effect, what better way to prevent challenges to capitalism or the global value chain – of which Yelp itself is inextricably a part – than to leave such discussions off the table entirely (which has the added benefit of making it easier to accept one’s own unpaid labor in the process). Acting as capitalists, Yelp’s managers encourage discourses that reproduce the dominant way of understanding and performing not just production but consumption, as well. As long as consumers fail to see how the politics of consumption are *self-relevant*, and as long as the local as a political construct can be repackaged as a consumable aesthetic, then Yelp can continue promoting itself as the arbiter of a Web 2.0 “power shift” while leaving power relations almost exactly as they were.

As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, prosumption is a prolific practice; consumer reviewing as part of the *digital* prosumption movement is also increasing. As everyday consumers make their way online to harness local listing sites as a means of sharing and *amplifying* their opinions about businesses, services and their general consumption experiences, what is *not* being said becomes just as important as what *is* being said. Reifying the “normal customer experience” is political *only* in that it perpetuates normative discourses about

consumption that are overwhelmingly *not* political and systematically eliminate political or activist orientations towards the act of consuming – and consuming locally, at that. Limitations on the range of available discourses become even more significant within the larger socio-cultural shift towards “local” consumption. Perhaps by reframing cybernetic space as a place where a “politics of place” *matter*, political discourses of consumption may seem less foreign or obtrusive to the more hedonistic or utilitarian frames that structure such conversations. If the local is where people find self-relevance, and it is this self-relevance that makes Yelp so popular, then the local seems like a good place to begin in the attempt to shape, enact or facilitate processes towards more globally-oriented changes.

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Chapter Six

Conclusion:

Unresolved Questions and Future Research

Prosumption and its centrality to the digital economy has not been studied as a form of consumer-citizenship at the local, place-based level until now; what I have tried to offer here is a project that connects various structures of participation to the micro-level of the individual as a means of accounting for the complexities involved in the “empowerment/exploitation” debate. Additionally, this project has aimed to underscore the relationship between virtual discourses with offline behaviors and to acknowledge the connection of these two “worlds” as interrelated spaces that co-construct the lived experience. While I have acknowledged contemporary debates over prosumption that construct this activity as a false dichotomy of “empowerment” or “exploitation,” I have also tried to get beyond some of the standard arguments that reify these dualities in order to understand the complex ways prosumers themselves articulate their practices and the way prosumption activities mediate (and are mediated by) a relationship with the local.

Originally I had hoped that this research might yield insight into how prosumers utilize Yelp to create counter-discourses that mobilize other local consumer-citizens around community issues but from the various data collected, it does not appear Yelp is generally used in this manner. Instead, Yelp offers prosumers a fun and easy way to enact public forms of self-expression that sometimes are (not) explicitly articulated within the politics of consumption (Goffman, 1959). Through Yelp, the empowered consumer largely makes the politics of consumption self-relevant through the display of a *lifestyle politics* that celebrates localism as a “better” form of consumption. While this arguably opens a space for more direct form of political consumerism around which local community members could organize, limiting localism

(and consumer-reviewing) to *lifestyle politics* tends to subordinate collective action to an individualized form of self-presentation – regardless of how well-intentioned (Bauman, 2001; Bennett, 2004). As such, while occasional “ruptures” to the site’s hegemonic functioning might agitate for localism as political consumerism, members themselves – in identification with the site’s management – will systematically prevent attempts at collective agitation by re-neutralizing discourse away from the political under the guise of protecting the site’s “integrity.” In other words, while Yelp is used to talk about and promote localism, localism is effectively stripped of a political identity which, I argue, further limits the capacity of *lifestyle politics* to effect change in any systematic way.

I will conclude this dissertation by summarizing what I believe are four central components that need to be addressed in future research. These issues are of particular salience in the context of the contemporary digital economy’s expansion “inward,” as new technologies, software, websites and mobile applications designed around a local, place-based web gain in use and come to define (and structure) participation in everyday life. While work on locative media is a growing area of scholarship (e.g., Humphreys, 2007; Papacharissi, 2010), such projects have not considered consumer-reviewing in any significant form. Furthermore, as this field continues to grow it is of central importance that scholars recognize that the local web *intermediates* relationships between the virtual and the real, and is thus not a “world” independent from either. Both of these latter points are underscored below.

In this conclusion, therefore, I begin with a review of the complex dynamics involved in the producer-consumer construct which embodies some of same complications and contradictions inherent to the consumer-citizen; particularly, I address how these subjectivities are bound up in irrational processes, and the ways in which prosumption is simultaneously

motivated by - *and* free from - asymmetrical relations of power (that is, the relations of power that prosumption rhetoric commonly claims it will redress). From there, I discuss the ways in which the tendency to identify with the owners of prosumer sites in this transference of “new” power relations contributes to the promotion of hegemonic discourses and what comes to be constituted as “legitimate knowledge.” This latter point raises a number of questions regarding how prosumers can recognize their freedom from economic incentives to effectively harness their own “exploitation” to produce a more equality-building agenda. From here, I then discuss Yelp as a technology of governance and its relationship to neoliberalism, suggesting that the application of Foucauldian-inspired analyses might yield additional insight to some of these complicated issues of power, dominance and control. Last, I look at whose “local” Yelp represents and how this also ties back to discourse and power, concluding that the issue of representation is perhaps the most salient and timely issue that ought to be addressed in prosumption and consumer-citizenship research.

More Consumer than Producer: Similarities and Conflicts

In an address at the 2011 Symposium for Teaching and Learning with Technology at Penn State University, scholar Clay Shirky discussed the “internal logic” of new media technologies and the complicated ways that people are approaching their production of publicly accessible content. In his discussion about prosumer motivations, Shirky argued that members of participatory web cultures are not motivated by the same financial interests or incentives as paid professional knowledge/cultural workers and so there is considerably less to lose - and more to gain - by using online spaces for whatever means the individual desires. Producing “free” content in the virtual occurs under a different set of logics and obligations as users are unconstrained by economic capital. In other words, prosumers claim virtual spaces to talk and

behave as they desire *because* they are not constrained by obligations to a paycheck, the public interest and/or corporate owners (i.e., stakeholders and shareholders) in the way that professional journalists and other media workers are. [Unpaid] prosumer discourse in the virtual thus encompasses a combination of self-relevant and expressive activities that oscillate between frivolous forms of information-sharing (e.g., funny cat pictures, consumer reviews about a café's wallpaper) in one moment, and "random acts of journalism" the next (e.g., coverage of street-level protest, consumer reviews that bring attention to discrimination). In many ways, this underscores Goffman's (1959) point about the nature of public action; that is, the goal of public action is always a form of *self-presentation* which is then "managed in the context of the nature of the audience" (Hardey & Hardey, 2009, p. 4). As Shirky concluded, this does not mean that such public actions or expressions are merely "frivolous, because sometimes [they're] not:"

One of the things we are having to get used to is that, as we know from our *own* lives, our personal life and our social life and our intellectual life are actually all mixed up around the edges. And you can certainly find centers for all of those things that are clearly isolatable, but at the edges they're all mixed up and now those edges are much more visible. So any attempt to say either, 'this person or this medium is either a serious medium or a serious person, or a silly medium or a silly person,' is going to break down.

Because you're going to see serious people do silly things and silly people do serious things.

Shirky's point about the "silly and the serious" resonates with some of the conclusions drawn in this dissertation. Neither Yelp *nor* Yelpers can be fairly situated as a "serious medium/persons or a silly medium/persons," or, as it were, hedonistic self-serving consumers and outward-looking citizens. Both the medium and its users are contradicting and complex, and many of the Yelpers I

spoke with reflexively acknowledged themselves as such. For different reasons at different times, Yelpers might locate themselves along different parts of the citizen/consumer continuum, yet nearly all – at some point – will find that these identities intersect at some point (in both their reviews and/or offline experiences). Just as the most “consumerist” Yelpers expressed aspects of citizenship, some of the most politically and socially conscious participants conversely engaged in regular “Internet scuttlebutt.” Between the sense of responsibility that Yelpers felt they had to the local public interest and their own amusement or personal goals, Yelping ultimately embodied the very polarities outlined by Shirky. A notable difference, of course, is that Yelping does not merely conflate an unpredictable oscillation between the “serious and silly” but also “work and play,” the “citizen and consumer,” the “producer and consumer,” the “real and virtual.”

The inherent unpredictability assigned to the unpaid prosumer, however, echoes what Sassatelli (2006) views as the limitations of consumer-citizenship (or in her terms, “critical consumerism”). That is, the unpredictability and irrationality of the *consumer* is ultimately what prevents consumption from making political strides. As cited by Jubas (2007, p. 249):

Consumers can do the same thing for different reasons or do different things for the same reason, making apparently political consumption choices ‘fragmented and potentially conflicting’. Some consumers might buy organic produce to support sustainable agricultural practices; others might buy it for their personal health benefits; others might buy it to promote their status within a social niche. Other critical consumers might want to buy organic produce but are unable to afford it; they might seem to be making conventional choices even as they bring a critical analysis about class, sustainability, health and globalization to their shopping and consumption.

We saw this unpredictability and irrationality of consumer choice unfold in both the analysis of consumer reviews in Chapter Four and interviews with Yelpers in Chapter Five. Prosumers often justified their “rating” based on a number of conflicting variables (e.g., celebrating the “locally sourced” philosophy yet removing a “Yelp star” for the failure to serve tomatoes mid-winter; reflexively acknowledging free labor while rationalizing the rejection of compensation). If consumers *and* prosumers are so unpredictable and irrational, serious and silly in different times and in different contexts, do we merely sit around and hope for more “serious” moments to arise? Where do we go from here?

In many ways this dissertation raises more questions than it asks; considering the points made by Shirky (2011) and Sassatelli (2006) above, perhaps the most important question at the end of it all remains whether or not the politics of consumption is an effective means of redressing inequalities or facilitating environmental, social, political and economic change *at all*. Many scholars of consumer culture have taken up this question and have cogently pointed out that *lifestyle politics*, citizen-consumerism or any other type of behavior that *rely* on the market is an ineffectual solution for solving problems that are in many ways *caused* by market practices (e.g., Johnston, 2008; Sassatelli, 2006, 2007; Soper, 2007; Stole, 2009, to name a few). Can citizens and activists actually use the market to transform the market? Can alternative discourses and practices of consumption be used as a form of counter-power to upset capitalist relations, when these relations are so heavily connected to consumption in the first place?

Prosumption, in this sense, raises similar questions in that prosumers, it appears, are no more rational or predictable than consumers. While prosumers *do* negotiate and contest some of the restrictive tendencies that site owners place on their ability to generate content, these acts of resistance are also not enough to de-center power relations, particularly when surplus labor or

discursive constraints are *rationalized* by these same users. Furthermore, many prosumers go so far as to *identify* with the proprietary and commercial goals of site owners; in other words, this suggests that prosumption does not so much *transform* the market as much as it *reproduces* the market. Thus, can prosumers effectively transform or redistribute power when content production appears to be occurring under the same relations of power as those that preceded online forms of prosumption? Like consumer-citizenship, are the “fragmented and conflicting” tendencies of prosumers to simultaneously negotiate and contest, rationalize and *identify*, what ultimately prevents prosumers from making political strides, as well? For example, what type of power do prosumers have in changing market relations when consumer-produced content for commercially-oriented websites produces nothing *but* surplus value for the site’s owners? In this sense, it may be that traditional modes of capitalist production have not so much been “transformed” as they have been displaced and rearranged.

Taking Yelp as a case study, I have argued that the site’s supposedly transformative power lies in its ability to decentralize the institutional management of reputation, opinion and taste cultures; Yelp thus provides consumers with a platform to create their own discourses about consumption, and in doing so decenters institutional forms of “expertise” which the site promotes (sells) as a form of *democratization*. According to Jubas (2007), however, “Democratization involves a radical change in capitalist and other exclusionary structures rather than a new, politically charged consumerism” (p. 251). This point seemingly applies both to consumer-citizenship *and* prosumption, which appear to be bound by the same contradictions, and which Yelp uniquely manages to combine. Does the site “radically change” exclusionary structures in its “democratizing” process and does it actually hold the capacity to do so? Furthermore, as Yelp recently announced its plans to make an IPO in the next year or so, the site

becomes officially incorporated into the larger political economy of “exclusionary structures;”¹⁸¹ so where do prosumers fit into this arrangement? While consumer-reviewing has afforded local consumers the opportunity to get inattentive bartenders fired from their jobs, or to prompt deli owners to make better potato salad, these are limited gains in the larger objectives of what prosumption and consumer-citizenship have promised. In the same respect, while Yelp has shifted power from traditional organizations into new hands (e.g., from the Yellow Pages to Yelp; from mass advertisers to Yelp) this is hardly a revamping or dismantling of “exclusionary structures.”

Therefore, if the goal of prosumption is to reclaim power from traditional capitalist structures – to transform the exploitative relations inherent to consumer capitalism – is it possible to harness the power of prosumption in a way that is not, in the end, *still* inherently exploitative? To this point, critical scholarship that reduces prosumption to little more than unpaid labor provides few viable solutions. Cyber-celebrants like Jenkins (2006) have argued that the immaterial benefits derived from participatory web cultures are compensation enough, while Tapscott and Williams (2006) suggest that the owners of prosumer websites like Yelp should allow users to share in the profits generated from their contributions; Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010), on the other hand, disagree. Echoing the skepticism of some Yelpers themselves about financially compensating prosumers for their labor, Ritzer and Jurgenson argue that this type of “payment” would work *against* the transfer of power that prosumption supposedly affords. Instead, “paying” prosumers for their work merely follows – and thus reinforces – the logic of capitalism in which workers are financially compensated for their labor. This effectively turns the “economy of free” (Anderson, 2009), or the prosumption-driven model, into an explicitly

¹⁸¹With this news, future research also must account for the political economy of Silicon Valley and recognize that prosumption is perhaps not always as “organic” of a movement as we have been lead to believe.

capitalist one, thereby further delimiting the potential for transformation into a more equitable system of social and economic relations. As Ritzer and Jurgenson note, “Where this step is taken we will be back to a more traditional capitalistic system, albeit one without paid employees and their attendant costs (e.g., health care, vacation time)” (p. 27). There is also some validity to arguments against material compensation as it pertains to the *type* of content being produced. In an interview with Mark S, for example, he expressed skepticism about being paid for his reviews:

If I'm going to write reviews for non-profit organizations, you know, I don't know that I'd want to get paid for it. I mean that'd be kind of crass; I mean they're a non-profit. Like I'd feel really weird if I got paid for writing a review for that.

Mark S raises an interesting point, and is one that ought to be considered. If the popular is used towards the political, should the “exploitation” of surplus labor necessarily be of primary concern as scholars? Volunteering one’s time for a local non-profit is not typically viewed as “exploitative” since no profit is exchanged from this work; yet this is certainly different from unpaid *corporate* work which most presumption entails (although “internships” certainly add an interesting dynamic to this perspective). But should we necessarily situate consumer-reviewing along these terms? As critical scholars focus on redressing the material inequalities that the digital economy reproduces through prosumption, these distinctions must also be accounted for. Would not a compensatory “pay model” also encourage production in certain ways (e.g., towards reviews that “pay the best?”) and similarly reproduce dominant discourses or power relations by turning prosumers into the functional equivalent of the “temp” worker? Future research amongst critical scholars in particular might consider abandoning the critique of “free labor” altogether and begin contemplating ways in which a more symmetrical relationship might be born out of

prosumption generally. Is it necessarily still exploitative when prosumers use a commercial site to agitate for change?

If there is any value at all to the collective organizing power that cyber-celebrants attribute to new media technologies, than popular sites like Yelp still have the potential to “make things happen.” Yelp might not be transforming exclusionary structures along the global value chain, nor is it being used to collectively organize locals to agitate for an equality-building agenda, but the possibilities for informing modes of consumption or infusing popular discourse with critical themes is still a real possibility at the micro-level of individual (Yelp) communities. The *real* task is in getting prosumers to realize they have little to lose in initiating such objectives. As local businesses continue to respond to consumer critiques via Yelp and thus inform users of their “power” to effect local change, the possibilities for Yelp’s civic and political potential expand. After all, while users can be banned or sanctioned for inappropriate comments, this is much different from being “fired” from a paid job or suffering some other economic consequence. It is also significant that, in fact, Yelp must work – and work hard – to establish and *retain* a loyal user base that will voluntarily identify with the motives and goals of the site’s owners as a means of capitalizing *on* prosumer productivity. Without prosumers, Yelp cannot valorize content or sociality; in this respect, prosumers do, to some extent, drive the digital economy. One participant reflexively acknowledged this point when she referred to Yelp as a “living institution.”

I mean Yelp is at the mercy of people, actively participating in it or it becomes completely insignificant and non-important...it's a living institution because it's being modified on a second-by-second basis, not even minute by minute. And it's living because...it is now at the control of the people who contribute reviews. So it's kind of like the creators of Yelp put it out there and they can control it and say 'this is too negative,[or] we named a name we'll pull it' but if everybody suddenly decides that Yelp should only be for restaurants there is nothing the people that own it can do to change that. Um, or, so

wherever we – wherever people who write the reviews want to take it, that's where Yelp is going to go.

In other words, if everybody on Yelp suddenly decided that the site is to be used to critique local government, to challenge hegemonic discourses of consumption or to leave the site for something new, to appropriate the mobile application as a locative media for flash mobs, protests or other such means of social action, then there is little Yelp's owners can do. While Yelp certainly directs production in certain directions, there is again no economic incentive forcing users to "play by the rules." Future sociological research is needed to better understand how and why prosumers in the virtual world, unconstrained by the economic incentives that motivate behaviors in the real, generally reproduce and actively work to preserve the culture of Yelp or sites like it. Why do prosumers willingly continue to reproduce "living institutions" like Yelp under a capital-driven logic that serves to materially benefit the site's owners above and beyond those who valorize the site in the first place? How does a virtual space like Yelp become *not the place* for political discourse? If prosumers are truly in control of living institutions in the cybernetic space, then how is control understood in the face of an active acquiescence to site terms and the voluntarily annihilation of counter-discourses? These are important questions for future research.

Legitimate Knowledge and the Production of Discourse

Getting back to Shirky's (2011) point, what he fails to consider is that prosumers are motivated by *other* forms of capital as well as *structural* determinants (e.g., site architecture, terms of service) that shape participation in specific ways. A deeper understanding of how the power of virtual discourse shapes participation in the "real" may be yet another entry point into

understanding why prosumers limit the scope of possibilities by loyally identifying with the site's commercial goals and imperatives from which they do not materially benefit.

Critical discourse analysts have long noted that power relations are constituted in the control and access to public discourse, particularly in the access and control over *context* and the structures of *text* and *talk* which when combined, regulate various dimensions of action and interaction (van Dijk, 1993); those who control discourse, or access to it, are thus theoretically by definition more powerful (Norris, 1990; van Dijk).¹⁸² Through a number of tactics – such as architecture, terms of service, *structure of feeling* (Williams, 1977)¹⁸³ – Yelp shapes the discursive context by defining “the communicative situation” as well as “what knowledge or opinions [users and readers] should (not) have, and which social actions may or must be accomplished by discourse” (van Dijk, p. 356). On Yelp, this is most explicit in the site's Content Guidelines that limit discussions around “the normal customer experience” and “first-hand experience” which are employed to regulate discourse ambiguously and inconsistently. However, if we look at these clauses as regulatory “structures” then we can see how the site is able to produce “culturally ingrained and institutionally powerful ways of looking at, experiencing and understanding particular areas of social life” (p. 147) – in this case, in the arena of consumption. On a practical level, as an ad-driven site Yelp *must* get users to [re]produce hedonic celebrations of consumption to stay in business; were the site to be utilized by consumer activists as a means of critically interrogating the hegemony of consumer culture, it is unlikely Yelp could retain revenue from advertisers, corporate sponsorships, financiers and its “daily deals” program. Additionally, if Yelpers stop consuming, what would they talk about?

¹⁸² In other words, it would be fair to say in this case that Yelp's web structure “controls” the context in which discourse takes place in that it has set specific rules and structures around which interaction and talk occurs.

¹⁸³ Structure of feeling refers to Raymond Williams' explanation for the confluence of the personal and social or consciousness and subjectivity; a historically-specific subjectivity that accounts for the dynamic nature of the personal lived experience in the context of a static and structured “social”.

By way of their connection to ideology or belief systems, discourses thus “deeply permeate what is allowed as legitimate knowledge in particular domains of social life” (p. Deacon et al., 1999, p. 147). As a social network site in which local community members congregate to talk and share information and experiences, Yelpers contribute to the production of “legitimate knowledge” through the types of utterances they choose to enable or constrain, engage with or “flag” from public viewing. By promoting and privileging a particular worldview, that which is deemed *illegitimate* is discourse that simultaneously excludes other possibilities and perspectives on domains of social life. Yelpers themselves actively take up a normative position and voluntarily promote and privilege some articulations of consumer-citizenship over others.

In the Gramscian (1971) sense of the term, hegemony, of course, is never total and must allow for momentary “ruptures” or “leaks” in normative discourses that challenge dominant conceptualizations of consumption. Consumer reviewers like Darren W (Chapter Four), Mark S or Scott S (Chapter Five) make seemingly progressive strides in bridging consumption with civic qualities. As noted, reviewers might also subvert the site’s filtering algorithms or, such as in the case study of Peace, Love and Little Donuts, subvert review removal by writing political critique into reviews that still manage to follow the site’s terms of service. The possibilities for Yelp to serve as a form of “counter-power” are thus not total void; if anything, presumption (especially open-source formats) challenges previous restraints on *access* to communicative forms – for example, who can speak, about what, and under what circumstances (Deacon et al.; Spurgeon, 2008; van Dijk, 1993). If power and dominance have long been exerted over the dominated through “privileged access to discourse and communication,” Yelp at the very least provides *access* for the digitally enfranchised (van Dijk, p. 255). Again, Yelp’s “potential” is in the

platform it provides members to produce and control discursive and communicative acts.¹⁸⁴

Future research, therefore, might look at what types of counter-discourses are required to permeate participatory web cultures like Yelp, and how we might *use* popular media platforms towards critical ends. How do we move critical discourses out of the margins (e.g., social movements, labor or progressive-leaning environmental organizations) and into the mainstream? Potential still exists for popular consumer-oriented spaces in which producing discourse *through and about* consumption is a central feature of participation. So what might merging the critical and the popular via local listing sites like Yelp, (or Urbanspoon, OpenTable, Angie's List) look like? How do readers interact with counter-discourses, and could reception studies shed light on how critical scholars might work to foster *prosumer-citizenship* around an equality-building agenda? There is much work to be done in figuring out how to bridge critical pedagogy with the free tools that the cybernetic space and new digital economy make available. Popular sites like Yelp reproduce create and promote a normative discourse and thus offer a potentially powerful tool for reframing conversation around consumer issues that matter. Let us critical scholars merge our professional and online "social selves" to engage in action research as a digital form of public scholarship or critical pedagogy.¹⁸⁵

Yelp as a Technology of Governance

A third entry point for future research in the area of prosumption, consumer-citizenship and the local involves expanding on some of the elementary points I made in earlier discussions of consumer-reviewing as a form of empowered consumption (see Chapters Four and Five) – specifically, the way in which Yelp can be understood as a technology of governance for self-

¹⁸⁴ While the site's users do self-police on behalf of the site's owners, without these willing accomplices Yelp would never have the labor-power to monitor content violations across millions of reviews that are constantly being published.

¹⁸⁵ I have yet to meet a critical scholar, for instance, who does not have a Facebook page or Twitter account.

management and actualization. By re-conceptualizing Yelp in this way, we can begin to see how issues of empowerment, exploitation and the transformation to “prosumer capitalism” are interrelated to the production of legitimate knowledge. As this dissertation revealed, Yelp is deemed most effective and empowering when it is used as a means of organizing one’s preferences and options amongst the vast array of consumer choices; in other words, when the virtual comes to regulate behavior in the real.

Thus, as a “technology of consumer choice” Yelp makes consumer-reviewing more useful to one’s particular lifestyle and helps “link the discourse of self-actualization to practical technologies of self-management and care for the self” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 30). Viewed in this way, Yelp helps individuals navigate myriad consumer choices and make better decisions that, through their own recommendations, will serve to help others act responsibly, as well.” As Andrejevic (2007) notes, consumers are increasingly encouraged to invest their time and energies in interactive activities (like Yelp). As the concept of the “consumer” is articulated as one who is increasingly responsible for his or her own consumption practices and experiences, interactive review sites like Yelp offer the power of collaboration and sociality needed to empower the self and others into *fulfilling* these responsibilities. Importantly, “The promise is that the final product will be more satisfying the more effort one invests in preparing (oneself for) it” (Andrejevic, p. 144). In this sense, Yelp provides a way for consumers to rationalize even *bad* consumption experiences in a self-serving way, a point noted by Jean-Luc S: “You also want to feel that your bad experience served a purpose.” In other words, with Yelp, no experience is “wasted” if it can be used to prevent others from making the same mistake.

Already, for example, political consumerism has been reduced to the market-based logic of “voting with your dollar.” The problem with this type of consumer-citizenship as discussed in

Chapter Four is that sites like Yelp reinforce a “voting” system based on the criteria of apolitical determinants like quality, service and aesthetics over production practices, business relations and ownership structure. As demonstrated in Chapter Three, Yelp sets the course for engagement by promoting a consumerist discourse that symbolically annihilates the “citizen” within its own framework of localism. This is important because as the local web develops as a site of intensified commerce, this might have direct implications for how we begin to see and treat our local communities within a market-oriented framework. It secures a discourse and culture that comes to expect a market-approach to localism as the natural and common-sense approach to consumption and social interaction. Related to this point, Yelp’s limited articulation of consumer-citizenship has in many ways absorbed local businesses into the logic of the brand. As such, consumers come to express “local” preferences in the way citizens vote for political candidates on the basis of political “brands” (e.g., the promotion of consumption-oriented traits like personality, physical appearance and slogans) (Passotti, 2010). The relationship between localism, branding and governance is a complex and under-researched area, particularly in the context of new media technologies and the digital economy.

Future research in the area of Yelp (or local listing sites generally) as a technology of governance will be particularly illuminating and necessary to understanding the impact that prosumption may actually be having on local economies and cultures. Furthermore, in conjunction with studies on locative media (e.g., mobile phones and their accompanying locally-based and locally-relevant applications), the “local web” potentially threatens to develop as a regulatory mechanism over local communities that operates in line with neoliberal economic policy more generally; that is, the technologies for governing serves to replace the neoliberal consumer-citizen with the *prosumer citizen* as the updated and more efficient version of the

“empowered consumer.” As such, “prosumer citizenship” would promote a privatized form of governing that further abstracts local governments from their regulatory roles. As consumers become independent “watchdogs” over local businesses, institutionalized forms of consumer protections and regulations are (at least discursively) subverted (and thus threatened) by prosumer-based sites like Yelp. As consumer-review sites increasingly dictate how “empowered consumers” make purchasing decisions, these efficiencies and “collective power” can be theoretically absorbed by the neoliberal political economy as rationale for further deregulating consumer protection programs (as we have seen occur with so many social services) (Clarke, 2007; Rose, 2001). While this research does not suggest that any steps have been yet taken in this direction, as locative media makes consumption more efficient in the near future, these are concerns that may inevitably arise.

We can also again turn back towards the empowerment/exploitation debate to see how it more usefully describes presumption as a means by which the ideologies, initiatives and politics of neoliberal governance have made their way into this particular cultural realm (Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Rose, 2001). From this perspective, future research might more clearly articulate how Yelp works to reproduce the problematic ideology that thanks to technologies that give us sites like Yelp, economic dominance and inequalities no longer exists; according to this faulty logic, all consumers now have equal access to the resources and information needed to make the “good decisions” that in turn, make them “responsible consumer-citizens.”¹⁸⁶ Research that takes

¹⁸⁶ Of course it is true that even now the citizen-consumer or consumer-activist draws upon aspects of empowered consumption in more politically oriented expressions of consumer politics. Boycotts and buycotts are often framed as expressions of freedom, consumer choice and sovereignty (Trentmann, 2007). However, it is also important to remember that the “consumer has a longer history than advanced liberalism, with roots initially in rights and equity, not individual choice” (p. 151). Furthermore, while Yelp might produce better, autonomous neoliberal consuming citizens, this is a far different form of “consumer-citizenship” than the consumer activist who upsets many of the very assumptions of neoliberalism driving the backlash against political consumer movements in the first place (Stole, 2008; Littler, 2009; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009).

a Foucauldian-inspired approach to discourse and power would be particularly useful in unveiling the implications of consumer-reviewing as a technology of self-governance. Local listing sites as part of the larger forthcoming “local web” become a technology for self-governing as they create a cultural opportunity for local citizens to obtain the lessons, information, resources and *redress* needed to insure a meaningful, entrepreneurial and thus responsible existence. In the forthcoming age of *prosumer citizenship*, therefore, this logic presupposes that all citizens, acting as consumers, can equally minimize risks and waste with the right amount of planning and research. Similarly, consumers, acting as citizens, can redress local private and public issues through the own generation of their own consumer reviews. As with other modes of neoliberal governance, such practices also presuppose “equality” and in doing so, reinforce systemic *inequalities*. The dominant view of consumer-citizenship thus moves from consumption as a *political project* or capitalist critique to a model of empowered consumption based on an ethos of individualism and self-motivation.

Whose “Local?”

Prior to his conceptualization of the prosumer, Toffler wrote in *Future Shock* (1970) that:

Mobility has stirred the pot so thoroughly that the important differences between people are no longer strongly place-related. So far has the decline in commitment to place gone...it might be said that commitments are shifting from place-related social structures (city, state, nation or neighborhood) to those (corporation, profession, friendship network) that are themselves mobile, fluid, and, for all practical purposes, place-less. (p. 92-93)

This dissertation has demonstrated that Toffler’s warnings of mobility have come full-circle as capital has relocated value in in the local web. As new technologies and participatory web

cultures facilitate a turn back “inwards” toward the local as a viable means of identification, many new questions about production, consumption and identity arise. However, the more diffused sites like Yelp and its accompanying mobile applications become, and the more power they have over shaping local traffic, patterns, social life and local culture, the more important question becomes: “Whose ‘local’ do these technologies and platforms represent?”

Yelp’s power to impact the local becomes somewhat problematic in that the site only deals with a slice of the “local” population. Yelp by no means encompasses the entire culture of a single city and perhaps some of the most visible lines that cut across Yelp are drawn by class (and to a lesser but equally important degree, race and age). Yelp appeals to a desirable demographic that has access to capital and services that many local city residents do not. While I did not conduct a full survey of user demographics, it is quite clear that “who’s on Yelp” is not representative of the diverse populations that make up most local communities (see Chapter One). This is evidenced not only by the type of people reviewing, but by what they review and *how* they review it. Yelp Elite events underscore this class divide, promoting “upper-class” taste cultures (exemplified by such party offerings as “pear pancetta with goat cheese and basil honey” at “small-scale private wine pairings”) (Yelp Community Blog, 2010). Furthermore, notwithstanding the digital divide that limits *access* to Yelp, what does the lack of diverse representation on Yelp suggest about the site’s version of localism generally, and the preservation of “local culture” more specifically? Whose “local culture” does Yelp aim to preserve? Such questions raise a number of possibilities for future research on this topic and I would argue that they are some of the more pressing and imperative issues that arise from this dissertation. Such issues are of particular salience now not only because they encompass larger implications of the digital divide, but because representation on the local web must be accounted

for while discourses and “legitimate knowledge” are still being shaped around these issues. Furthermore, representation also matters as it relates to the issue of governance; specifically, how does the emergent local web only further disenfranchise those who lack *access* or the *resources* to participate? How does the inability to participate facilitate a discourse of victim-blaming in which those without adequate access are perceived as failing to take responsibility for self-development, entrepreneurialism and actualization?

Conclusion

While this dissertation intended to *describe* and *explore* an emerging web-based practice, it has also been motivated by more pressing social issues surrounding exploitation and empowerment driven (or afforded) by social media. Although a case study of Yelp may at times feel like an analysis of what is, at the end of the day, a seemingly bourgeoisie problem of “free [but really fun] labor” I hope to have demonstrated that the issue is, in fact much larger than that. It has been my contention that Yelp offers up a unique opportunity to not only appropriate prosumption to encourage consumer-citizenship, but to mediate the potential for social and political action that reconnects people through a *local*, place-based identification. If “political energy and legitimacy have moved more easily to consumption as a site of action and mobilization,” as Trentmann (2007, p. 148) suggests, critical scholars must ask *where* this political energy ought to be located and harnessed if local listing sites – sites based on discourses *through and about* consumption - are generally regarded by users as “not the place for that.” So where is the “right place?” As long as Yelp users continue to identify with the hegemonic discourses promoted by the site’s owners rather than agitating for the right to create discourses representative and reflective of local (or global) conditions, then Yelp’s political potential to shape the politics of consumption is limited at best. As sites and mobile applications like Yelp

gain in popularity and as users become more dependent on them in negotiating local terrain, these media and technologies serve to invariably regulate and impact negotiations with the local in new but capital-intensive ways. Future research might anticipate these possibilities, and consider how local communities might harness them towards more collaborative and progressive ends. Additionally, we might also look at the way locative media are “glocalizing” not only prosumption but local consumption experiences (Robertson, 1995). As an international “local” website, Yelp homogenizes *global* discourses about local consumption by enforcing the same rules of discourse equally across all local communities, despite their regional and national differences.

Critical discourse analysis does not aim to merely observe, describe or explain social behaviors or phenomenon; ultimately, the success of such analyses is measured by its contribution to *change* (van Dijk, 1993). I would like to think that in some way, this project has (or will) influence how prosumers come to think about their online activity as a complex interplay between consumerism *and* citizenship (or, the serious *and* silly). Even more so, I would hope this project inspires future and existing prosumers to view their activities as an opportunity to engage in decidedly political projects. How this research contributes to larger systems of sociopolitical change, however, remains to be seen.

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APPENDIX A: IRB MATERIALS



Institutional Review Board (IRB)
The Office for Research Protections
205 The 330 Building
University Park, PA 16802 | 814-865-1775 | ORProtections@psu.edu

Submitted by: Kathleen Kuehn
Date Submitted: June 22, 2010 10:11:20 AM
IRB#: 34317
PI: Kathleen Kuehn

Study Title

1>Study Title

'Produsing' the Local: Participatory Consumption on Local Listing Sites

2>Type of eSubmission

New

Home Department for Study

3>Department where research is being conducted or if a student study, the department overseeing this research study.

Mass Communications

Review Level

4>What level of review do you expect this research to need? NOTE: The final determination of the review level will be determined by the IRB Administrative Office.

Choose from one of the following:

Exemption

5>Exempt Review Categories:

Choose one or more of the following categories that apply to your research. You may choose more than one category but your research must meet one of the following categories to be considered for expedited review.

[X] Category 2: Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observations of public behavior

unless:

Basic Information: Association with Other Studies

6>Is this research study associated with other IRB-approved studies, e.g., this study is an extension study of an ongoing study or this study will use data or tissue from another ongoing study?
No

7>Where will this research study take place? Choose all that apply.

☒ University Park

8>Specify the building, and room at University Park where this research study will take place. If not yet known, indicate as such.

Data collection will largely occur in the primary investigator's office, James 206D.

Interview participants from University Park or State College will be conducted in James 206D unless the interviewee requests otherwise. All phone interviews for participants outside State College will be conducted in James 206D.

Interview locations for participants outside State College but within driving distance will be conducted in a location convenient and comfortable for the interview participant. These locations are not yet determined since the interview participants have not been identified at this time.

9>Does this research study involve any of the following centers?

☒ None of these centers are involved in this study

10>Describe the facilities available to conduct the research for the duration of the study.

A majority of research will be conducted in Room 206D of the James Building, the office Kathleen Kuehn, the study's principal investigator. In-person interviews, phone interviews and those over Skype or Adobe Connect will be conducted in James 206D when convenient for the participant. Interviews performed electronically will be conducted when the principle investigator is connected to Penn State's secure VPN client.

The James Building is a University-owned building that is locked throughout the summer and requires a University-issued key for entry. The building is publicly accessible during the day and early evenings. University personnel lock the building in the evening, upon which entry to the James Building requires a University-issued key or an activated PSU ID that can be swiped for entry. The PI for this study, Kathleen Kuehn, has a University-issued key for entry into the James Building.

The office of the principal investigator is secure and private; it is located on the second floor of the James building. The floor has been designated for use by graduate students in Communication only. Room 206 itself is a small "wing" of the second floor of the James Building that is secured

24-hours a day, 7-days a week with a locked door that requires a private passcode for entry. This code is issued only to graduate students in Communication; the PI, Kathleen Kuehn, has a copy of this passcode. Beyond this small office is a second office -- 206 D -- which is the office of the study's principal investigator. Room D is separated from Room 206 by a second door that is also locked 24 hours a day/7 days a week and requires a University-issued key for entry. Room 206 D is the personal office of Kathleen Kuehn, the study's PI. It is private and secure.

There are bathrooms for both men and women on the second floor of the James Building, as well as a water fountain. Offices have air-conditioning and heat, which are regulated by the University. There is an emergency exit on this floor, as well.

The office also has wireless internet; the password for this internet service is only available to graduate students in Communication and must be authorized by the College of Communication for use. Graduate students can also connect to the campus's VPN client here for secure connection. James 206 D also has a private telephone landline.

The PI for this study, Kathleen Kuehn, will occupy this office through the duration of the study.

11>Is this study being conducted as part of a class requirement? For additional information regarding the difference between a research study and a class requirement, see IRB Guideline IV, "Distinguishing Class-Related Pedagogical (Instructional) Assignments/Projects and Research Projects" located at <http://www.research.psu.edu/orp/areas/humans/policies/guide4.asp>.
No

Personnel

12>Personnel List

PSU User ID	Name	Department Affiliation	Role in this study
kmk395	Kuehn, Kathleen	Mass Communications	Principal Investigator
pp6	Parsons, Patrick	Telecommunications	Advisor

• Role in this study Principal Investigator

First Name Kathleen **Middle Name** **Last Name** Kuehn **Credentials**
PSU User ID kmk395 **Email Address** kmk395@psu.edu **PSU Employment Status** Employed
☒ [X] Person should receive emails about this application

Mailing Address 700 W. Foster Avenue

Address (Line 2) Apt B

Mail Code **City** State College **State** Pennsylvania **ZIP Code** 16801

Phone Number 520 245 3927 **Fax number** **Pager Number** **Alternate Telephone**

Department Affiliation Mass Communications

Identify the procedures/techniques this person will perform (i.e. recruit participants, consent participants, administer the study): Principal investigator - will recruit participants, obtain consent from participants, administer the study, collect data, analyze data and will be responsible for final write-up.

Describe the person's level of experience in performing the procedures/techniques described above:

The researcher has had two graduate courses in qualitative research methods and one graduate course in quantitative research methods; the principal investigator has collected data for both qualitative and quantitative studies, including participant recruitment, obtaining consent and

administering the study.

- **Role in this study** Advisor

First Name Patrick **Middle Name** **Last Name** Parsons **Credentials** PhD

PSU User ID pp6 **Email Address** pp6@psu.edu **PSU Employment Status** Employed

☐ Person should receive emails about this application

Mailing Address 105C Carnegie Building

Address (Line 2)

Mail Code **City** University Park **State** Pennsylvania **ZIP Code** 16802

Phone Number 814 863 5678 **Fax number** **Pager Number** **Alternate Telephone**

Department Affiliation Telecommunications

Identify the procedures/techniques this person will perform (i.e. recruit participants, consent

participants, administer the study): None. This person is the principle investigator's research adviser and will read the final written results of the study. Patrick Parson's may also read early drafts of the study, as well, but will not have any involvement with data collection, transcription, coding or analysis.

Describe the person's level of experience in performing the procedures/techniques described above:

Patrick Parson is a Full Professor in the College of Communications and has served on a number of committees using various forms of data collection, including qualitative methods. He also holds an appointment as the Don Davis Professor in Ethics, with both a professional and personal commitment to research ethics. Dr. Parsons has been a dissertation adviser for numerous graduate student committees in the College of Communications and is highly knowledgeable in research processes.

Funding Source

13>Is this research study funded? Funding could include the sponsor providing drugs or devices for the study.

No

NOTE: If the study is funded or funding is pending, submit a copy of the grant proposal or statement of work for review.

14>Does this research study involve prospectively providing treatment or therapy to participants?

No

Conflict of Interest

15>Do any of the investigator(s), key personnel, and/or their spouses or dependent children have a financial or business interest(s) as defined by PSU Policy RA20, "Individual Conflict of Interest," associated with this research? NOTE: There is no de minimus in human participant research studies (i.e., all amount must be reported).

No

Exemption Questions (Prescreening)

16>Does this research study involve prisoners?

No

17>Does this research study involve the use of deception?

No

18>Does this research study involve any FDA regulated drug, biologic or medical device?

No

19>Does this research study involve the use of protected health information covered under the Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act (HIPAA)?

No

Exemption Questions

20>Maximum number of participants/samples/records to be enrolled.

60

21>Age range – Check all that apply:

☒ 18 – 25 years

☒ 26 – 40 years

☒ 41 – 65 years

☒ 65 + years

22>Describe the steps that will be used to identify and/or contact prospective participants. If applicable, explain how you have access to lists or records of potential participants.

All Yelp users and members are publicly accessible. All profiles are publicly available. Unlike other social networking sites, there are no privacy options for the user to set on his or her account; therefore, all content that the user produces is open to the public. Potential participants can be identified through browsing online.

A call for interviews will be placed on randomly selected Yelp forums across an equal number of urban, suburban (or small town/small city) and rural networks. Interviews will be secured and conducted if the participant meets the requirements for participation (see previous). Some Yelp users may be contacted by the principal investigator through Yelp's private messaging service, which is a feature on the website, in order to obtain a range of variance of users. Participants may be identified by the principal investigator by browsing the Yelp site or during the process of data collection for other parts of the study (such as the content analysis, architectural analysis, etc).

The PI, Kathleen Kuehn, will also utilize the snowball sampling technique once an interview participant has been secured. At the conclusion of the interview the PI, Kathleen Kuehn, will ask the interview participant if he or she can recommend fellow Yelp users who fits the study's criteria of "active user" for interviewing. The PI will ask the interview participant to pass along the PI's contact information to others who might be interested in participating in the study; if it is possible to obtain the Yelp user name of the interview recommendation, then the PI, Kathleen Kuehn, will contact the user through Yelp's personal messaging service with a link to the call for interviews.

23>Choose the types of recruitment materials that will be used.

- ☒ Email
- ☒ Other

24>Describe the other methods that will be used to recruit potential participants?

A call for interviews will be posted to randomly selected Yelp networks on the website, www.Yelp.com. These networks and discussion boards are publicly available.

25>When and where will participants be approached to obtain informed consent/assent? If participants could be non-English speaking, explain how consent/assent will be obtained. If consent/assent will not be obtained, explain why consent/assent will not be obtained.

The PI will use implied consent only for this study.

Participants giving in-person interviews will be given the implied consent form before they begin the interview. Interviews will not begin until the implied consent form has been issued to the participant.

Participants filling out the online questionnaire will see the implied consent form as the first page of the survey.

Participants giving telephone or virtual interviews will be read the implied consent form by the PI, Kathleen Kuehn, before the interview begins.

It is unlikely that there will be any language barriers or other special circumstances in this instance being that Yelp.com is a highly social website that requires a lot of interaction and a command of the English language for use. Almost all content on the US Yelp page is in English; any content in a language other than English is a rare exception.

26>Provide the background information and rationale for performing the study.

This research is an investigation into the phenomenon of "local listing sites," which are websites that allow internet users to rate and review local businesses and services. Local listing sites are part of the growing trend of consumer review websites that allow internet users/consumers to interact with others, leave reviews, comment or share thoughts, reviews and experiences of products, businesses and services. Examples of consumer review sites include Trip Advisor, IMDB.com, Yelp.com and AngiesList.com. These sites have grown out of consumer-review features on websites like Amazon.com and eBay.com, where active consumers regularly embrace their right to leave feedback on purchased products and services. A recent survey showed that 84% of US consumers report that online reviews of products and services influence everyday purchasing decisions (Pattison, 2009). As a result, many industries have been forced to change the way they have traditionally done business.

Over the past decade, consumer reviewing is an activity that many scholars see as a form of "productive consumption" or "participatory consumption" in that it is a way for consumers to harness the collective power of the internet or world-wide-web by discussing, rating and reviewing experience goods and services. Local listing sites in particular converge the content of traditional Yellow Pages with the more interactive features of social network sites (think: Yellow Pages meets Facebook). Little information, however, exists about the act of consumer reviewing.

Almost no scholarly investigation of local listing sites exists, either. Especially surprising is the lack of research on how users are harnessing their own consumer power in these spaces despite the growing corpus of literature on other forms of consumer-generated content (also referred to as “user-generated content”). The lack of research available on the processes and practices of user-generated content on local listing sites is a topic ripe for analysis.

27>Summarize the study’s key objectives, aims or goals.

This research aims to address the functions, processes and practices of user-generated content on local listing sites by attempting to better understand how "participatory consumption" occurs through these sites. This qualitative study will offer a critical and user perspective on local listing sites with the goal of understanding how consumers become media producers when they rate and review products and services on local listing sites. This study will also aim to understand how consumers-as-media-producers experience and make sense of their productive activity on these sites. These general questions will be assessed through a case study of one local listing site, Yelp.com.

A critical case study will assess the degree to which Yelp affords users the opportunity to engage in the act of "participatory consumption," an act that the literature has largely determined to be an "empowering" activity for consumers. The first part of the study asks: How does the website's structure/architecture, business model, privacy agreements and other features enable or constrain consumer agency and empowerment? A second part of the study aims to understand how Yelp users themselves make sense of their productive activity. What does it mean for people to review local businesses and services? Why do they do it? How do they understand their activity? What is the relationship of the local to this reviewing activity?

Since this project is in some part exploratory, it begins with an analysis of how local listing sites like Yelp function as a form of participatory consumption.

Research questions for Section I: The Site analysis

RQ 1: To what degree and how does the local listing site Yelp function as a space for participatory consumption?

RQ 1b: To what degree and how does Yelp enable consumer agency and power?

RQ 2: How does Yelp’s business model, technological infrastructure and technosocial affordances shape the site’s participatory functions and use? (In other words, how might the site’s underlying structure or available features enable or delimit the activities of participatory consumption?)

Then, in order to get at the social practices and perspectives of participatory consumption from a user perspective I propose the questions for Section II: The User Perspective

RQ 3: Why do consumers produce content for this website?

RQ 4: How do "Yelpers" (i.e. the reviewers on Yelp) perceive their activity as consumer reviewers, and how do they understand this activity in terms of consumer power and agency, if at all?

RQ 4b: Do Yelpers perceive themselves as consumer-citizens?

RQ 5: In what ways does localism or locality matter to this form of participatory consumption, if at all?

RQ 6: How do Yelpers adopt and integrate the site and its mobile technologies into their everyday lives?

Questions RQ 3-6 aim to understand what social practices emerge from this form of participatory consumption while also accounting for the site's distinctly local features.

In sum, this research will interrogate the functions of local listing sites alongside the processes, practices and perceptions of users who generate content for these sites.

28>Describe the major inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The criteria for inclusion are active Yelp users who are over the age of 18 and currently reside in the United States.

Active Yelp users are defined as regular reviewers that have posted content in the last 30 days, have produced a minimum of at least five reviews, and displays a network of at least one other Yelp user in his or her "friend" list (this would be equivalent to having one "Facebook Friend"). These numbers are relatively low but are designed to allow for new, highly active users (i.e. users with few friends but many reviews), while eliminating those who have been on the site for years but rarely ever produce content. This research also aims to secure interviews with members whose high degree of activity has earned them membership to the "Yelp Elite Squad." Yelp Elite are the most active of Yelp reviewers and are awarded their "Elite" status by the website itself. Users must first apply for consideration, however. Yelp Elite publicly display their status in their profiles with a virtual "badge." In addition to regular active users and Yelp Elite, interviews will also be conducted with "Yelp Ambassadors." Ambassadors are geographically dispersed, paid employees that "manage" local Yelp communities by throwing the parties for Yelp Elite. Ambassadors also promote local events, fairs, and other public events. Both Yelp Elite and Ambassadors have publicly available profiles and will be emailed for interviews if none respond to the interview call.

No interview participant will be excluded by race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, creed or any other determinant. This study will attempt to be as inclusive as possible and secure a spectrum of participants that reflect a diverse group of users. However, since a majority of the interviews will rely on responses to the call for interviews, securing a diverse or multi-cultural sample size cannot be guaranteed.

Exclusion: Participants who do not meet the criteria for inclusion will be excluded. Specifically, users who have not posted content or written a Yelp review in more than 30 days, users who have zero "friends" listed on Yelp, and users who have less than a total of five reviews, will be excluded. Participants must meet all three of these requirements, not just one. Users who are under the age of 18 will also be excluded, which reflects the demographics of the site. Participants who do not currently live in the United States will also be excluded in order to keep the population size "local" on a national level.

29>Summarize the study's procedures by providing a step-by-step process of what participants will be asked to do.

In a way, the study is methodologically broken into two separate parts: I) the critical site analysis and II) a user perspective.

Within section I, all content analyzed is publicly available through the website, Yelp.com. This section features an analysis of Yelp's promotional discourse. Press releases, new stories, advertisements, available merchandise, Yelp's weekly newsletter, web content, privacy statements and other site documents will all be collected and analyzed to determine how the site portrays itself as a site of participatory consumption. There will also be an observation of content

produced by users to determine what kind of discourse they are producing, or what kinds of conversations they are having online; however, users themselves will not be asked to do anything in this section. Again, this is all publicly available data. Observations of content in this section is unrelated to the content discussed with interview participants in Section II. The site observation will be broken down into three community types across the state of Pennsylvania that (arguably) have different conceptualizations of "local communities": urban, suburban/small city/large town, and rural. The definitions for these community types have been determined through Census data and the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Again, this observation of content is *separate* from the interviews in section II.

Section II: User perspective.

The user perspective will be obtained in this section primarily through interviews with single participants or in group interviews where group interviews are a possibility.

- 1) Participants will be recruited via call for interviews written by the principle investigator, Kathleen Kuehn. The call for interviews will be posted on randomly selected Yelp discussion boards across a number of different community types (each geographical region in the US has its own Yelp page that features discussion boards open to the public. Anyone browsing the Yelp website can access and read the discussion boards). Participants may also be contacted via Yelp's personal messaging service if the call for interviews does not yield timely responses. Participants may also be contacted via email through Yelp's personal messaging service in order to obtain interviews with highly active users (all user activity is publicly displayed).
- 2) Once participants are identified, the principal investigator will arrange the interview time, location and/or technology through which the interviews will be conducted in the case of phone or online interviews, with the participant. Decisions about the interview set-up (technology, time, place, etc) will be made based on what situation is most practical and works best for the participant. In other words, interview location, time and recording details will be determined on a case-by-case basis since participants will be dispersed throughout the United States.
- 3) Participants will be asked to sign a consent form or give implied consent before interviews begin. Participants will also be asked at this time if they agree to being audiotaped or recorded.
- 4) If they choose to participate, participants will be asked to answer a series of questions in a one-on-one format (interview questions are attached). Participants will be interviewed by the principal investigator about 1) their history of Yelp use, 2) the process involved in reviewing, 3) their practices of using Yelp and Yelp mobile applications in their everyday lives, 4) their perceptions of what they think their reviewing does for themselves and others. Participants will be informed that they do not have to answer any questions they do not want to answer for any reason. Some in-person interviewees may be asked to "walk" the principal investigator through the process of "Yelping" (i.e. the consumer-reviewing), in which case the participant may show the PI how he or she uses Yelp. In this case, the participant may want to open his or her Yelp webpage in order to demonstrate this process (with permission from the participant).
- 5) The interviews will last approximately 60-90 minutes, but no longer than 120 minutes. The interviews will be recorded using a digital audio recording device. The recordings will only be accessible by the PI, Kathleen Kuehn. The interviews will take place in the private office of the PI, Kathleen Kuehn. Additional interviews may take place over the phone, through Skype, or through a secure electronic conferencing device such as Adobe Connect. Participants may be asked to conduct a follow-up interview to clarify statements given in the initial interview. During

the initial interview, participants will be asked for contact information that the PI will use to contact participants for a follow-up interview, if necessary. Should a follow-up interview occur, participants will be asked questions based on their original interview with the goal of clarifying or expanding on original statements. Follow-up interviews will be digitally recorded and the recordings will only be accessible by the PI, Kathleen Kuehn.

6) Interview participants will be asked to contact the PI, Kathleen Kuehn, at any time if they should think of anything else they would like to add in regards to the questions asked during the interview process. The interview participant will be given the appropriate contact information for the PI, which is located on the informed consent form.

7) Respondents who want to participate in the study but cannot (for whatever reason) coordinate a one-on-one interview with the PI, Kathleen Kuehn have the option of answering a majority of the same interview questions through an online questionnaire on SurveyMonkey. The link to this survey will be sent to participants on a case-by-case basis. All questions on this form are open-ended. See questionnaire attachment. The questionnaire will be used only as a "last-ditch" attempt at involving potential interviewees.

30>Indicate the type(s) of compensation that will be offered. Choose all that apply.

☒ Compensation will NOT be offered

31>Will any type of recordings (audio, video or digital) or photographs be made during this study?
Yes

32>What type of recordings will be made (including digital)? Choose all that apply.

☒ Audio

☒ Video

33>Where the recordings/photographs will be stored?

Backups of recordings will be uploaded to an external harddrive purchased by the PI for the use of this study only. The digital recording device AND the harddrive will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in James, 206 D, the principal investigator's office.

34>Who will have access to the recordings/photographs?

The principal investigator, Kathleen Kuehn, only.

35>How will the recordings be transcribed, coded and by whom?

When transferred to the external harddrive for back-up, the recordings will be labeled by the number in which the interviews are conducted. A separate coding sheet will be kept on a password protected computer at the private home of the principle investigator, Kathleen Kuehn. The coding sheet will be kept separate from the external harddrive. The coding sheet will identify participants and their pseudonyms to be used in the written results.

No participant will be identified by his or her real name in the written results.

36>Will the recordings/photographs be destroyed?

Yes

37>How and when will the recordings/photographs be destroyed?

Recordings will be played back through either the digital recording device or through the backup file of the recordings kept on the external harddrive and transcribed by the principal investigator alone. The PI will wear headphones during transcription to prevent others from hearing the recordings. The PI will code all transcripts alone, as well.

38>Will any data collection for this study be conducted on the Internet or via email (e.g., on-line surveys, blogs or chat room observations, on-line interviews, email surveys)?

Yes

39>Does this study involve any foreseeable risks and/or discomforts to participants – physical, psychological, social, legal or other?

No

40>Will data be stored securely and accessible only to the research personnel listed on this application?

Yes

41>Describe how data confidentiality will be maintained.

The digital audio recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of Kathleen Kuehn, the principle investigator. The digital audio files will be kept on an external harddrive owned by Kathleen Kuehn, which will also be locked in filing cabinet. Only Kathleen Kuehn will have access to the recordings. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of individuals consenting to be interviewed. Only Kathleen Kuehn will have access to the list of pseudonyms.

Caution will be taken in the written results to insure that interview statements are not able to be linked to content produced online by the interviewee. Where something discussed in an interview pertains to the participant's online activity, measures will be taken to insure the interview statements cannot be linked to the online content. One such measure will include the use of pseudonyms for all participants, online users and the businesses and services reviewed online or discussed in interviews. Direct quotes from online content will not be used in relation to direct quotes from interviews, thus preventing an online search of the direct quote from revealing the interview participant. Paraphrasing will supplement direct quotes and will be structured in a way to maximize the participant's privacy. Participants will be informed of this possibility and may agree to the use of searchable direct quotes in some instances.

Where possible, information sent electronically will be encrypted. All participants will be informed about the security measures taken to protect privacy, but will also be informed that regardless of security measures taken, internet correspondence can never be 100% secure. Participants will also be informed that they can opt out of the study at any point, and do not have to address any questions they do not want to answer.

Adobe Connect's security features allow for the protection of sensitive data; the meeting organizer (the PI, Kathleen Kuehn) manages communication flows through personal control of the program's security features -- for example, disabling undesired functionality and controlling access to meeting rooms so that the interaction is limited to the PI and participant only. Adobe Connect uses 128-bit SSL encryption to protect communications and data in real time, during

meeting sessions, as well as during on-demand playback and when systems are upgraded. By default, none of the applications are shared with the public; the PI defines and controls which applications can be shared.

All Skype-to-Skype calls, chats and other communications are end-to-end encrypted. Skype uses an Advanced Encryption Standard (Rijndael) which is used by US Government organizations to protect sensitive, information. This level of encryption makes it nearly impossible to decrypt the content of Skype's peer-to-peer communications. Skype's encryption is inherent in the Skype Protocol so it cannot be turned off by the user. Specifically, Skype uses 256-bit encryption in order to actively encrypt the data in each Skype call or instant message. 1024 bit RSA is used to negotiate symmetric AES keys. User public keys are certified by the Skype server at login using 1536 or 2048-bit RSA. certificates.

Document Upload

CONSENT FORMS

Document 1001 Received 06/09/2010 13:28:00 - Other Implied Consent Form_Exempt

Document 1002 Received 06/22/2010 10:07:09 - Other Informed Consent

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Document 1001 Received 06/05/2010 09:32:10 - Interview Guide and Questions

Document 1002 Received 06/05/2010 09:32:26 - Online Questionnaire

RECRUITMENT

Document 1001 Received 06/09/2010 13:38:29 - Recruitment Materials Discussion Board
Interview Call

Document 1002 Received 06/09/2010 13:38:54 - Recruitment Materials Email Script: Interview
Call

Document 1003 Received 06/09/2010 13:39:27 - Recruitment Materials Email Script 2:
Snowball Sample M

REVIEW - REQUEST INFO

Document 1001 Received 06/09/2010 11:50:57 AM - Returned for Additional Information

Document 1002 Received 06/21/2010 03:21:00 PM - Returned for Additional Information

SUBMISSION FORMS

Document 1001 Received 06/14/2010 09:57:36 AM - Application Auto-generated by
eSubmission Approval

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

This letter will be emailed to active Yelp members who might serve as potential interviewees/respondents.

Yelp Study: Looking for Interviews

Hi _____,

My name is Kathleen and I'm a graduate student at Penn State University. I'm currently writing my dissertation on consumer review sites like Yelp and am in the process of trying to find active Yelpers (like yourself) who'd be willing to be interviewed as part of this research project – would you be interested? It seems like you'd be a really great resource for the project from what I've read so far of your reviews.

If you agree to be interviewed I can go into more detail about the study then, but the main research goal is to better understand how consumer review sites are changing the relationship between everyday people and local businesses/services. Like I said, this is for my dissertation so it's not connected to Yelp, its advertisers, or its employees in any way! Most of the questions will be about your Yelp history, how you use the site and the process of writing reviews. I am currently conducting interviews in person, over the phone, or over the web (via Skype, Adobe Connect, or another suitable format). We can arrange the technology around what works best for you if you agree to be interviewed.

Anyhow, if you are interested in participating I would love to hear from you -- you can write me back here (through Yelp) or by email: kmk395@psu.edu.

Also, feel free to pass this note along to any other Yelpers (over the age of 18) who you think might be interested...

Thanks!

- Kathleen K
PSU College of Communications
kmk395@psu.edu

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Sex	Age range	Location	Job/Occupation	Yelp Elite	Total Number of Reviews	Total Number of Friends	Total Photo Uploads	Number of Received Complements
Tina A	F	30s	West	Unemployed	No	17	3	0	2
Monica C	F	30s	West	Fitness Coordinator: Corporate Gyms	2009-2011	265	363	29	1,412
Maddie T	F	early 40s	West	Unemployed ad sales	2010-2011	160	121	0	961
Scott S	M	33	West	Unemployed behavioral/social services; creative writing MFA	No	1,530	521	0	4,478
Mya L	F	mid-40s	West	Occupational Therapist	No	29	19	0	80
Christina Z	F	late 30s	West	Admin Assistant	No	5	15	0	1
Mark S	M	30s	Northeast	Laborer	2011	521	665	4	950
Ken D	M	30s	Northeast	Unemployed web designer	2007-2011	1,916	1,918	14,047	16,172
Penny E	F	30s	Northeast	Social worker	2010	49	23	0	42
Rajit G	M	30s	Northeast	Graduate Student	No	15	4	0	1
Kelly J	F	early 30s	Northeast	Post-doctoral Student	2009-2011	111	45	11	33
Oliver J	M	early 20s	Northeast	Graduate Student	No	29	10	6	1
Jessica B	F	31	Northeast	Administrative Assistant	2010-2011	139	62	1	173
Ellen K	F	40	Northeast	Unemployed IT Specialist	2008 - 2011	2,247	797	2	743
Peter M	M	42	Northeast	(Securities/risk management)	2000-2011	265	63	418	152
Mary Beth R	F	early 20s	Northeast	Restaurant Server / Recent College Graduate	2011	116	12	8	12
Jean-Luc S	M	30s	Northeast	Graduate Student	No	184	27	139	39
Josh S	M	40	Northeast	Unemployed Social Worker	2009-2011	104	60	0	230

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Opening Introduction: [After informed consent is signed or given by the respondent]:

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. My name is Kathleen Kuehn and as I explained before I am really interested in learning what you have to say about your engagement with the website Yelp.com. I would like to ask you some questions about how you came to be a Yelp reviewer, what the reviewing process is like, how you use the site. I hope to use this information to get a better understanding of consumer-reviewing especially when the reviews are about businesses and services with a more local basis. Before we begin, however, I want you to know that there are no right or wrong answers and you are not required to answer any questions you aren't comfortable with or don't want to discuss. The whole interview should take about sixty to ninety minutes. Are you ready?

I. History of use

1. How did you first hear of Yelp?
2. How long have you been a member of Yelp.com?
3. What prompted you to open an account?
4. Tell me about the first review you ever wrote.
 - a. What prompted you to write it?
 - b. What events or occurrences inspired you to post the review?
 - c. How do you feel about the quality of your first review?

II. Processes

1. How has the process of reviewing businesses and services changed since your first review, if at all?
2. From start to finish, tell me about the process of writing a review now.
 - a. What factors typically prompt you to review a business or service in most cases?
 - b. What does it take to get you to write a review?
 - c. What types of businesses and services do you commonly review?
 - d. What types do you avoid?
 - e. How do you decide what to include in a review? How do you decide what to omit?
3. What kind of information do you omit from your reviews? Under what circumstances do you omit aspects of your experiences?
4. What makes a 'good' review?"

III. Functions

1. How would you describe Yelp?
 - a. What does Yelp do for you?
 - b. What service does it provide you?
 - c. What purpose does it serve in your life?

2. If I had never heard of Yelp before, how would you describe it to me?
 - a. How might you describe the site's goals?
 - b. Would you describe Yelp as a public service, entertainment, or something in between?
 - c. What does Yelp offer you that similar sites like AngiesList, Placeblogger, CitySearch or even Facebook do not?

IV. Practices

1. Describe your involvement with Yelp.
 - a. How much time do you spend on Yelp each week?
 - b. How do you use Yelp on a daily basis?
 - c. What function does it provide for you?
 - d. What do you feel Yelp gives you in return for your reviewing?
2. What features of the site do you tend to utilize the most? What features do you like best?
 - a. In what ways do you use Yelp's mobile applications? Discussion boards?
3. How did you become a / do you know any Yelp Elite / Yelp Ambassador? Describe this role and experience / relationship.
4. Who visits your page?
5. Do you check the profile viewed count?
 - a. Have you been surprised/disappointed by the number of visitors?
6. Have you met (IRL or electronically) any new people through Yelp?
 - a. Who? What context?

V. Perceptions

1. What do you think your reviews accomplish?
2. What impact do you think your reviews have on the decision-making processes of other consumers?
 - a. How has the act of consumer-reviewing changed your shopping experiences? Decision-making processes?
 - b. Has anything occurred as a result of your reviewing that was unexpected?
 - c. Do you trust the reviews of others? Why?
3. What kind of feedback do you get from other Yelp users? Business owners?
4. Does Yelp have the power to "make or break" a business?
5. Do you worry about being sued?
6. In what ways has the act of reviewing changed the way you interact with or perceive local businesses? In what ways do you think reviewing has changed the way local businesses interact with or perceive you?
 - a. For example, in what ways has your review of [name of business or service reviewed by the interviewee on Yelp] changed the way you perceive your experience with that establishment as a consumer?
7. Tell me what you know about Yelp's business model.
 - a. How does the site make money?
 - b. What is your opinion on the site's advertising model?

- c. What have you heard about the controversy over local businesses suing Yelp and Yelpers for negative reviews left by users?
- d. In what ways does Yelp's "backstage" activity we just discussed influence your perception of Yelp? In what ways does it influence your perceptions of your own activity on the site?

Concluding comments:

So what I heard you saying throughout this interview was _____
Your feelings about Yelp and your reviewing activity seem to be that _____

I really appreciate the time you took for this interview. Is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know that we didn't get the chance to talk about?

I should have all the information I need. Would it be alright to call you at home or email you if I have any more questions? You are always welcome to contact me as well, in the event you think of anything else you want to add. Thanks again.

VITA: Kathleen M. Kuehn

Education

Ph.D., Mass Communications; Pennsylvania State University, August 2011

M.A., Media Arts; University of Arizona, May 2005

B.A., Journalism, History; Rutgers University, January 2001

Publications

Kuehn, K. (2010). Rize: The commodification of blackness in David LaChapelle's 'Rize.' *Journal of Information Ethics*, 19(2), 52-66.

Kuehn, K. (2010). Online/Offline communications pedagogy: YouTube and the development of an electronic citizenry. *Electronic Journal of Communication*, 20(1-2).

Kuehn, K. (2009). Compassionate consumption: Healing Africa through Gap's Product (RED) campaign. *Democratic Communiqué*, 23(2), 23-40.

Hardin, M., Kuehn, K., Jones, H., Balaji, M., & Genovese, J. (2009). Have you got game? Hegemonic masculinity and neo-homophobia in sports coverage of John Amaechi. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 2, 182-200.

Selected Conference Presentations

Kuehn, K. (2010, November). *Participatory consumption on Yelp.com*. Presented at the meeting of the National Communication Association, San Francisco, CA.

Kuehn, K. (2010, October). *Producing the local: The political economy of local listing sites*. Presented at the meeting of the Union for Democratic Communications, University Park, PA.

Kuehn, K. (2008, July). *Do U YouTube? Online communities and the development of an electronic citizenry*. Presented at the meeting of the International Association for Media and Communication Research, Stockholm, Sweden.

Kuehn, K. (2008, May). *Compassionate consumerism: Healing Africa through Gap's Product (RED) Campaign*. Presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association Conference, Montreal, Quebec.

Hardin, M., Kuehn, K., Jones, H., Balaji, M., & Genovese, J. (2008, May). *Have you got game? Hegemonic masculinity and neo-homophobia in sports coverage of John Amaechi*. Presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association Conference, Montreal, Quebec.

Employment

2008 – 2011. Instructor, Pennsylvania State University

2006 – 2007. Teaching & Research Assistant, Pennsylvania State University

2004 – 2006. Program Coordinator, The Media Literacy Project at the Loft

2003 – 2005. Teacher of Record, University of Arizona